MEETING AT THE LAST JUDGMENT

A NOVEL BASED ON THE TRUE STORY OF ONE MAN'S ESCAPE FROM THE CORROSIVE INTRIGUE OF A COMMUNIST STATE

Petru Dumitriu

Meeting at the Last Judgment

is the moving story of a flight to freedom from behind the Iron Curtain and a compelling documentation of the struggle for ascendancy among the Communist leaders of Rumania today. Petru Dumitriu has written his novel out of painful personal experience, for like the narrator of the book, he escaped to the West with his wife but had to leave his infant daughter behind.

The action of the novel takes place during the period immediately following the "thaw," when the Central Committee in Rumania began a relentless crackdown on many officials for heresies from the Party line. Dumitriu's narrator, a high-ranking bureaucrat who is secretly engaged in collecting material for a book which violates Party principles, attends sessions in which important men and women fall prey to the hate, pride, and lust of their leaders. In an account filled with heightened suspense and superb penetration of character, the narrator follows the fates of his colleagues and friends, describing the intolerable pressure of the life of one official upon another, the slow, desperate growth of fear, the long, unceasing process of betrayal of ideals, friendships, and human dignity. The encircling net of human destruction that slowly closes in around him leads inexorably to his own fall from grace and, finally, to his fateful decision to flee from the country.

Perhaps never before has the interior mechanism of power within a Communist country been examined at so close a range. With verve and a glittering narrative sweep, Petru Dumitriu brings us face to face with a world which to him became a nightmare. We find ourselves direct witnesses here to authentic personal drama and suffering.

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JUL 1962

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PETRU DUMITRIU

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY RICHARD HOWARD

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CHAPTER

1

I

"Thy breasts are like towers," says the Song of Songs, if I remember correctly, "thy body like the cedars of Lebanon, thy belly like a cup of ivory, and in thy navel is the honey of the bees of Carmel: come, my beloved, kiss me with the kisses of thy mouth . . ." Thus speaks the wise king Solomon to the Shulamite. "I am black, but comely," says the Shulamite. "Come, my beloved, my heart awaits thee: kiss me with the kiss of thy mouth."

I've known only one woman named Shulamite. She wasn't black, her breasts weren't like towers, and she wore no bangles on her ankles nor on her arms. She was a washed-out, graying blond with timid eyes, the kind whose exact color is difficult to remember, something be-

tween blue and gray. No one would have dared find out if her navel tasted of the honey of Canaan, for she was the wife of Diocletian Sava.

In one of the organizations I've worked in, a woman who was a member of the Cell Bureau had known both of them when they—and she—were young. Nothing much had happened to her since. But on the pediments of public monuments, secretariats, barracks, and banks, in railroad stations, town halls, and factories, you always saw, among the five portraits of the Party Secretaries, Diocletian Sava's leonine muzzle: the broad, dark forehead, the thick, foreshortened nose, the corners of the mouth drooping above the jutting chin. And Shulamite was his wife. My friend, the comrade in question, remembered Shulamite very well.

"She was a girl of sixteen, her father quilted mattresses somewhere in the Jewish quarter of the Calea Dudesti, Dudel-Street, we used to call it. You know those miserable shops, with smoked goose-breast in the dim display cases. Through the uncurtained windows, you could see whole families bent over the red quilt they were sewing on around the oil lamp, or under the single fly-specked electric bulb. Shulamite told me later on that in the evenings, before going to bed, all the children gathered naked around the lamp and killed their lice by crushing them between their nails. It was in this neighborhood that the 1941 massacres were committed and then the whole area was set on fire. But Shulamite hadn't stayed there for long. Since the age of twelve she had been working in a back room of a shop on Strada Lipscani, tying up packages, opening crates, doing anything that would keep her from having any contact with the customers. She was too

unattractive for that: too withdrawn, too discreet. But hard-working and honest. The shopkeeper trusted her completely. Everyone has always trusted Shulamite.

"I myself met her through Diocletian. At the time he was a little over twenty. Now we're both forty, our hair is gray—as a Party militant, I can't start dying it, making myself up—and he looks at least fifty, he's turned white and grown monstrously fat; you've seen what huge shoulders he has now, and his back, his hands! Frightening. But even at the beginning he was big and strong, and he had the same big dark head and that lion look. I was in love with him: I never told anyone; Diocletian himself—least of all—never knew. Nothing existed for him but social and political questions; his brain kept mulling them over, and he would talk a great deal—very well, too—explaining what was happening around us. So much power emanated from him, like a heat wave or a killing frost, that you always stopped talking when he talked. Shulamite followed him to the meetings, to the street demonstrations, to his own apartment. Once we were walking through the Strada Aureliu; it was deserted and still. Blades of grass were growing between the cobblestones. Diocletian was talking. I was on his right side, listening. On his left, Shulamite was listening too; but while I was arguing, asking questions, she was silent, you couldn't even hear her footsteps: discreet, withdrawn as always. I had realized for some time that there might be something between them. I admit this made me angry with Shulamite, but I got over that long ago. Why does she follow him? I wondered. I'm more intelligent than she is, I'm the one who understands him, she can't even appreciate this extraordinary man as he deserves. You see me the way

I am now, prematurely aged, but in those days I was a flame—bold, fearless, capable of anything. Or at least that's what I thought. Shulamite kept still, wrapped packages, opened crates, copied bills in the back of a shop, and came to our meetings and demonstrations. And she followed Diocletian Sava—exactly as she was doing that day in the Strada Aureliu, on his left, without a word, her footsteps noiseless. Suddenly he stopped walking, interrupted what he was saying, and turned to Shulamite with a look that I thought was both impatient and annoyed.

" 'Shuli,' he said (that's what he used to call her, and he still does; to me this diminutive sounds as silly as it is unbecoming), 'you go home now; I'll see you tomorrow.'

"I imagined this mute presence exasperated him, and I confess, to my shame, that I was delighted. Since then I've learned to know him better, and I can tell you that he's not so easy to understand. No, it was not because he was exasperated or bored that he had sent her away. Maybe he knew Shulamite had some work to do? Or did he want her to rest? Not likely, at our age. I don't know; nor do I know what Shulamite felt or thought. She said quite neutrally:

" 'All right. Good-by.'

"And she went off. The next day, I couldn't detect a sign—not even a look, not even a blink—that betrayed the slightest rancor. And my stupid satisfaction at remaining alone with him was immediately punished: Diocletian changed neither his subject nor his tone, and looked at me no more than before, nor for any other reason than to be sure I understood and was convinced. We walked for hours and hours, arguing endlessly, until our mouths

were dry and our feet hurt; after which he shook my hand and said good-by, and we separated.

"In the period that followed, I realized that they were living together. Why? What did he see in her? She was still a child; of course she was young, her mouth was fresh—you could expect that much from someone her age—but she was so withdrawn! No, I couldn't understand what he saw in her. After all, it wasn't a housekeeper he needed! Later on, when he was already a minister, a member of the Central Committee and of the Politburo, I decided to leave my first husband. The night of the break I didn't know where to sleep. I called them up; they sent a limousine from the Ministry for me, and I lived with them for several days, eating whatever Shulamite cooked—it was dreadful, burnt, tasteless, or with a taste that made you want to throw the plate out the window. And she wasn't even capable of hiring a cleaning woman or a cook. And Diocletian would eat whatever it was and say nothing; he was thinking about his political and economic problems, wolfing down whatever was put in front of him, either not saying a word or else talking politics through the whole meal. So it wasn't a housekeeper he wanted—or found—in Shulamite. But what was it?

"I suspect you'll understand better if I give you the facts. I was arrested by the Secret Police, questioned, beaten, tried, and condemned to several years in prison. There was no longer a parliamentary government then; there had already been the royal dictatorship of the Iron Guard and now there was Marshal Antonesco's. The Party had no more than a few hundred members, half of

whom were in jail. Communication between those in prison and those outside was made by utilizing the remains of the defunct democracy. Besides, the bourgeois machinery of repression was inferior to ours. It contained humane individuals, and corrupt ones: both were accessible. Through parents, lawyers, and prison guards, the Red Relief transmitted the Party's instructions and messages, and food, clothes, and medicine as well. Comrades with false papers pretended they were relatives of the prisoners, talked to them, and the guards never knew what was happening. That was how I received my mission to contact the 'Party outside.' I went to the visiting room: a room with bare walls, barred windows, and doors lined with sheet iron. A guard was standing there listening to whatever was said. I went in. The other iron door opened and a young girl came in, slender, timid: it was Shulamite. Withdrawn, without personality, right? Well, she'd been sentenced in the same trial along with me, but by default. I got ten years. She got twenty. And if they had caught her then—it was during the Battle of Stalingrad—they would have sentenced her to death. For a second I was petrified. Then I ran forward and took her in my arms. I was supposed to be her sister, and my emotion could pass for affection. She slipped a piece of paper the size of a postage stamp into my hand, and it contained the Party's message. We exchanged a few words, kissed each other, and she left the room. It took me some time to get over it; the comrades who were my cellmates kept asking me why I was so silent. I couldn't understand Shulamite. Instead of staying under cover and coming out only for essential meetings and at night, here she was in the prison visiting room with false papers, pretending she was my

sister. Later they decided not to expose her to such danger. Those who had sent her hadn't thought of the risks she was running; she was so discreet and withdrawn you never thought of such things, to look at her. Besides, she hadn't changed. In the visiting room, when I saw her, she had the same calm, withdrawn expression."

II

That's what I learned from my friend who was a member of the Cell Bureau. As for myself, I met Shulamite at the Soviet embassy on the night of November seventh, at the party celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution. When we arrived, the ambassador was still receiving his guests in the hall. In uniform, his chest covered with crudely gilded and improperly enameled decorations, his red, potato-shaped muzhik's face smiling over a pair of huge gilded epaulets. Beside him stood the pigeon-breasted ambassadress, with her fleshy back, her crown of tiny ash-blond braids, her pink-and-white arms as big around as my thighs, and a glacial, rigid expression: like a Visigoth queen receiving the submissive and decadent Romans. Behind her, in line, the councilors and attachés, gilded too, with their cold and hostile wives. Behind us, in the doorway, the long black-and-chromium cars kept driving up, and out of them climbed men in dark suits and women in evening gowns. In front of us, at the other end of the hall, the crowd gradually accumulated in the salons. You couldn't move or turn around without bumping into official shoulders, official breasts, or official behinds. The men in

funereal suits and pearl-gray ties; the women without *décolleté,* without long gloves, often in just a white blouse and black skirt, like schoolteachers: these were ministers or wielded great power in the machinery of the Central Committee, and wore no make-up. Two workers were there, in everyday clothes: these were the Heroes of Labor. The Western diplomats, in evening clothes on purpose: they stared with bored expressions at the crowd, knowing virtually no one, for virtually no one dared speak to them.

I was with my wife; in those days I was still slender, and she was as she has remained, extremely decorative, particularly when we were together, both of us so tall. She was wearing a dress of heavy Chinese silk with a great bow behind: copied from a French fashion magazine in a co-op of limited access, where the best dressmakers in the country worked for the wives of the important men and for those who were given special privileges, like my wife, a friend of the Premier's wife. Because the dress was low-cut and because such things must be concealed—the Comrade Minister of Foreign Commerce, a person to be feared, had measured her from head to foot with a terrifying glance of her stony eyes, gray-green and cloudy as lapis lazuli—my wife had thrown over her shoulders a huge shawl of creamy Venetian pink, inherited from her grandmother. Tall in her evening gown, the huge embroidered shawl around her shoulders, with her classic profile and tawny bun of hair, I led her as a groom might once have led a great white battle charger by the bridle, at a solemn pace, before the Sultan.

A moment later I found myself face to face with Dio-

cletian Sava and Shulamite. Heavy-set, dressed anonymously, he was not in his element. People like Diocletian shouldn't be seen in the confusion of a party with two thousand guests, but on a tribunal or a scaffold. He was like a lion in a sheepskin, among a bleating flock. Several other sheep here were false too, merely skins wrapped around much more dangerous animals. Beside him stood Shulamite in a short skirt of cheap black satin and a white blouse with tiny folk embroidery, not wearing a single ring or bracelet, her hair combed back and cut short, unbecomingly. No make-up, no perfume. Well scrubbed with soap and water. I don't even remember her expression. My wife doesn't remember either. At the time I knew nothing of Shulamite and Diocletian, except that he was one of the great leaders. He was rather friendly toward me. I greeted him, introduced my wife. He looked at her, then turned toward Shulamite and said to my wife:

"Meet each other. My comrade."

Shulamite shook our hands and said nothing. As if we had met no one. Her husband had spoken the five words with a certain embarrassment, a certain humility or hesitation, so imperceptible that almost no one would have noticed; besides, who would have expected anything of the kind from this terrible personage? With a thrill of secret terror, I agreed mechanically with whatever was said and resolved that I would no longer wear a bow tie and that my wife would appear in the same dress every year, but not this dress. For if this man who was great, truly great, if he himself . . . then the rest of us even more. Which is what we did, until we hit upon a more radical solution.

I said that I didn't know Diocletian. As a matter of fact, it was only afterward that a series of complementary reports, and my presence at an event that I shall describe, made him known to me. I received the first report during a conversation with my friend Ieremia Iorgovan, of whom I shall have nothing to say in this narrative, except that he was quite cowardly. One should seek information about brave men and courageous acts from men who know something about courage. But I can't help it: my friend Ieremia Iorgovan was the only person present at the occasion he described to me. A few days after the resounding and tragic fall of Diocletian Sava, I ran into Ieremia Iorgovan, who asked me:

"Well now, who would have believed such a thing? The great Diocletian, fallen from power! Expelled from the Central Committee! You can't imagine what kind of a man he is!"

And he told me how he had gone on a campaign tour with Diocletian during the 1946 elections. I had voted too; anyone who didn't vote was reported. As I came in, a helmeted soldier armed with a machine gun searched me to make sure I had no grenade or pistol: everyone was suspected of voting wrong, or of thinking wrong. No one spoke. Inside, my friend Erasmus Ionesco was sitting on the electoral committee. He was remarkable. After the vote, he counted the ballots. He showed each one, unfolded, to the delegates of the bourgeois parties, asking in a grave tone of voice, "For us, isn't it?" The vote was for them, not for us. But they watched, saw, and kept still. They were afraid. Which didn't keep them from rotting in prison.

"Yes, in 1946, during the elections," my friend Ieremia

Iorgovan said. "During the electoral campaign. He was going to speak in a factory where most of the workers were Iron Guard. I was sitting beside him in the car; the cobbled country road was shaking us up. It was very hot, or maybe I was the only one who was hot, and he looked at me and laughed: 'Afraid, aren't you?' I laughed too: 'Of course I'm afraid.' He laughed louder: 'Don't worry. Just keep calm and don't show anything.' Then he spoke to them, to those workers, and made them do just what he wanted. When he starts shouting with his arms raised, he makes people rise up as if he had put gunpowder under their seats. He roared, 'Comrades! The reactionaries are trying to . . .' and so on. Or else: 'Comrades! Forward to . . .' and so on."

And my friend Ieremia Iorgovan imitated the powerful voice of Diocletian Sava roaring in a mass meeting.

"But there was one time he didn't laugh," my friend went on. "In the munitions factory they were all Iron Guard, and they had let us know they didn't want to receive any Party envoy. He didn't even mention it to me. But I knew. The car drove us in front of the factory entrance. Behind us were the streetcar tracks, empty lots, marshes full of rubbish or dirty water; the railroad ran across them. In front of us, the factory buildings and the iron gates of the entrance. Nothing moved. We were in the car, he and I, the chauffeur, and two *pistolari,* his bodyguard: these two men were the only indication he even knew there were Iron Guards in the factory. But when we stopped in front of the gates, he said, 'You boys stay here. I'm going in.' No one answered. The place was too quiet. Everything was too motionless. It was as if we were paralyzed. At such moments you have

no will, no initiative, you don't move. Besides, what would have been the use? He was the one who would have to speak. I was there only to accompany him; the others, to guard him. But we were all in the car, eyes fixed on him as he crossed the street, tall and heavy, his back too broad. He took normal strides, quite slow: one step, two, three, four, five. *Tac-tac-tac-tac!* A burst of machine-gun fire. I saw him stop, look at the factory, fall on his knees. He was lying with his face against the cobbles, motionless. A quarter of a minute passed, maybe, or a quarter of a second. The two bodyguards leaped out, and dragged him to the car, holding him under the arms. His eyes were closed and blood was running out of his nose and mouth. I thought he was dead, but he wasn't. He's even had time to be made into an effigy and then to fall from power."

So much for what I learned from Ieremia Iorgovan. And now this is what Erasmus Ionesco told me. We were together once, again after the catastrophe. Erasmus had been drinking. He was pale, even greenish; he had grown much fatter (power is fattening; we had all grown fatter). In his egglike face—the poor fellow was bald at thirty—his little penny-bank slit of a mouth smiled as he said:

"I went with Diocletian to Transylvania, after the Hungarian counterrevolution."

No one among us would have dared call the insurrection anything else in public. But Erasmus wouldn't even do so in private, not even in his thoughts.

"You know, the million and a half Hungarians in Transylvania were in an extremely unstable political condition. The Party sent Diocletian to keep them quiet.

He took me with him. We left by plane before dawn. It was wet, there was fog, the planes were shiny with it. It was hard to see the red lights of the control tower. You know? The violet fog, the black clouds, the red lights, the greenish reflections of the aluminum, the fluorescent lights, and our yellow faces, the faces of men up at five in the morning after two hours' sleep, after a committee meeting that had lasted fourteen hours. He said nothing. Until we landed, he didn't say one word, except what I'm going to tell you. The plane was a special one, with padded seats, sofas, actually—a kind of salon. There were only the two of us and two bodyguards—both friends and enemies, for I suppose they reported every step he made to someone or other. They fell asleep right away. He was sitting in a corner, his head lying back on his shoulders, looking out the window. There was nothing to see but the fog. He wasn't looking at anything, I think. He was judging the situation. I suppose he already felt something was going to happen. Probably a few observations made in a funny tone of voice; or criticisms made to people in sectors he was directing, or to himself, inside the Politburo. Or something else. I'm basing my suppositions on the way he acted. They had sent him to deal with the most delicate situation: holding the Hungarians in check without provoking them. If he made the least mistake, another leader would come from Bucharest and 'take over the work in progress' as they say, while they sent Diocletian back to Bucharest, where disgrace would be waiting for him. He was probably sizing up the Hungarians, too, and looking for the right way to handle them. He had certainly been told when he left, 'Be careful, use a certain tact, but also

a complete politico-ideological firmness; talk things over with them, find out what's on their minds, explain the Party line to them,' and so on. With the same instructions, an idiot could blow up all Transylvania in a few days. Well, there we were, all we could hear was the plane's motors. I was dozing. Suddenly I opened my eyes and noticed one of the pilots—there were three of them—leaning over Diocletian's seat. I remember noticing the material of his uniform, worn and shiny at the elbows and seat. Diocletian looked the pilot up and down; his head was twice as large as the aviator's. 'No, comrade,' he said simply and firmly. 'We're going to Târgu-Mures, not to Oraşul Stalin.' The pilot wasn't satisfied. He looked like a bear with a toothache. He answered respectfully, 'It's my duty to tell you that I cannot take this responsibility.' The pilot left. I woke up completely. I looked outside. Nothing. White fog. I looked at the altimeter over the door to the pilot's cabin; the words were in Russian, but I could read the figures the needle swept past: 1800, 1700, 1000, 600, one after the other. We were in radio and radar contact with the ground, but in the fog a difference of four or five yards is enough. We were at 500 when the centrifugal force flattened me in my seat as if I weighed hundreds of pounds and at the same moment I saw the earth for the first time: a field a few yards under us; some trees that went by like ghosts. The plane regained altitude, jolting in the air pockets. The door opened, the pilot appeared, pale, and came toward us, holding on to the seats to keep from falling, for the plane was still bumping. He said, 'I've tried, but it's impossible. We almost ran into a hill.' Diocletian looked at him and again said, as calmly and

firmly as if he had heard nothing, 'We'll land at Târgu-Mures.' And he stared into the pilot's eyes. The pilot said, 'At your service, comrade,' and went back through the door under the altimeter, which showed 800. The needle moved slowly: 750, 700, 650, 600, 550, 500, 450. Diocletian told us all to attach our seat belts and turned back to look out the window. I saw the trees under us again, some houses, then the fog. I waited for the crash. I was sure we would all be killed. But there was no crash: we were climbing again. We circled the field. The pilot came back, with a strange, serious face, and said something in a low voice to Diocletian, who shook his head. The pilot left again. After two or three minutes, I felt a sudden shock and in a second I was drenched with sweat, while the shocks continued, diminishing. We landed in an empty field, where all we could see was fog. Diocletian said nothing. I suppose he was thinking about the right method to keep the Hungarians quiet. Afterward I saw how he managed it. He arranged meetings of all the organizations, let everyone speak, asked them to say everything that was on their minds, and listened patiently, for weeks on end, from early morning until late at night. And when everything was over in Hungary, he returned to Bucharest, letting them think it over; by this time, they've probably realized how he took them in, so that they missed their chance," Erasmus Ionesco concluded, laughing in his peculiar way; he had a short, abortive, impotent laugh.

And I remembered how during that same winter, when Diocletian had come back from Transylvania, I had been at his own house. He had had me invited to a small party at the Soviet embassy, where small fry like my-

self wouldn't have been invited on their own. He didn't stand on ceremony with my friend Prospero Dobre, the only real historian in the East: a man for whom history has an inner spring, a concealed catch he's trying to discover. Diocletian had had him invited, like myself, because he had been too busy to find any other time to talk to him. They had talked together all evening long.

"What you've just been saying interests me," Diocletian Sava concluded. "Give me your manuscript, I'll read it."

Prospero said something in a harsh, almost inaudible tone. We met on the top step at the embassy doorway. Several employees and the police on duty were shouting out the numbers of the cars. In my country, we don't shout, as in Balzac or Proust, "The carriage of Monseigneur le Prince de Guermantes!" but "Two thousand four hundred sixteen!" and then a long black limousine with two *pistolari* beside the chauffeur glides along the to us, a person almost as important as Diocletian was wait- Avenue Kisseleff and drives up in front of the door. Next ing for his car: the famous Malvolio Leonte. Short, fat, heavy-set, he looked like a nice fat aunt who always says something funny. He stared at us; he had spoken about Prospero Dobre's cold. Laughing, with the jovial cordiality which so easily deceives the naïve when they have dealings with this kind of person, he said to Diocletian:

"No, send him home. Don't you see what a state he's in? And suppose something happened to him? I'm the one who'd be responsible for the obituary!"

He was obviously enjoying himself. As a matter of fact Prospero Dobre, a young and brilliant scholar, a future academician, our only Marxist historian of any real value,

would have had an obituary in the journal of the Central Committee, and a final endorsement would have been given by a member of the Politburo, someone like old Malvolio himself. Diocletian's face darkened and he answered with a good deal of violence:

"Is that a joke? If it is, it's the completely unsuitable kind you're always making!"

And without another word, not even good night, he turned his back and got into his car. Prospero Dobre and I followed him. This little incident, offensive to an individual as powerful as Malvolio Leonte, and, more generally, the respect in which Diocletian Sava held him cost Prospero Dobre years of persecution and were responsible for his ultimate and despairing resolution. But perhaps I begin to sound like Saint-Simon, who traced the wars of Louis XIV to a quarrel with Louvois over a crooked window at Versailles. Opportunities are afforded by linked series of events, details proceed from a total structure, and in a system where a Malvolio Leonte's authority was possible, my friend Prospero Dobre could only disappear. But such considerations anticipate what is to follow. It should be added that Prospero Dobre, before getting into the car, answered in his husky voice:

"It might just be possible that I'll be in the guard of honor beside your own coffin."

He was insolent and hard. Malvolio Leonte laughed good-humoredly: he didn't want it to be apparent whether or not he had reacted to this. In the car, Diocletian said nothing. He too wanted to seem not to have heard what Prospero said. We left Prospero at his own door and went on to Diocletian's. He was living in a huge, elegant house near the lakes. There was a sentry

box in front of the door and a policeman on duty day and night. In front of the house, a car with two bodyguards was always waiting. There was no light except on the second story. We went in. Everything was clean, disinfected, anonymous. The furniture had been confiscated along with the house, and revealed the tastes of the former owner, some rich bourgeois. The house seemed uninhabited. We were about to sit down in Diocletian's study when Shulamite appeared. I don't remember how she looked or what she said. She was inconspicuous: a being completely withdrawn inside herself. Diocletian said to her in a fatherly tone:

"Shuli, bring us a bottle of wine and something with it."

She looked up at him, for he was much taller; she betrayed the faintest glimmer of a smile, and gave him a look of calm adoration, like that of a faithful dog and of a saint. I've never seen that limpid, innocent look anywhere but in Shulamite Sava's eyes, and I don't ever expect to see it again.

Diocletian didn't drink a drop, didn't eat a bite. I've never seen him eat in public. He probably ate the horrors Shulamite cooked without even knowing what he was eating. He discussed labor organization with me. Then he began talking about what obviously preoccupied him—Stalinism and de-Stalinization.

"He was a great man," Diocletian said. "He shed blood, of course, but how else could you ensure the unity of an enormous nation, one subject to so many anarchic forces? Cromwell shed blood in Ireland, and Napoleon put all Europe to the sword. Each revolution is ended by a man who consolidates the new state: that's

a law of history, and we'll have to see if your friend Prospero has recorded it in his essay on the Mechanics of Revolutions."

He talked about Stalin for a long while, and it was the only time I ever heard him spoken of with such serenity and fairness, whereas at the time people were all passion, for and against the late tyrant. I myself was thinking of something else: the look in Shulamite's eyes.

III

It was also from my friend Erasmus Ionesco that I heard the account of the catastrophe: he told me about it the same evening that he described the plane trip to Târgu-Mures. He had participated in the session of the Central Committee as a member of the "apparatus," important enough to be present in a corner of the room.

"You know," he said, "the big room they use for films and the large-scale sessions, like the one taking place then. You know, the gray plush curtains, the bare walls, the stage draped in red, with the portraits of the Marxist saints, Stalin included; but imagine the sensation: instead of the five portraits of our Secretariat, just one. But all five were seated at the table with the microphones. The atmosphere in the hall was ice-cold. You know how they greet each other, pretending to be jovial, completely in control of themselves, men who know what an unwise word can cost them. Maybe ten of them knew what was going to happen. What struck me most was the one portrait: what did it mean? Was the censure of the *cult of*

personality over? And besides, with the five was my chief, old Malvolio. Something's going to happen, I told myself. And then the great leader stood up and after a brief introduction said that questions of general Party policy would be discussed; Comrade Malvolio Leonte would read a report on the subject. Malvolio stood up, holding a sheaf of papers—have you noticed he cuts his nails so short that maybe a quarter of an inch of flesh sticks out beyond them? He was heavy, but solid-looking, and always clean-shaven. By the third sentence, I understood. The reading of the report lasted three hours, and each year of Diocletian's political or administrative work was presented as a series of grave errors verging on sabotage. I looked at Diocletian. He sat with his elbows on the table, broad as a tank, his head bigger than any other head in the room, though all of them have put on so much weight—they're twice the size they were before—and listened to the reader. No expression. The others too: no expression. Malvolio was reading:

"'. . . *breaking with the collective,* he fell victim to *petit-bourgeois individualism.* D. Sava' (he made the contraction, on purpose: an important nuance that implied condemnation) 'pursued his own policy, alien to that of our Party. He has since fallen lower and lower, *slipping into* an attitude *stamped with vileness,* full of *hypocrisy,* until he has reached *morbid manifestations,* to the point of *losing the very physiognomy of a Party member.*'"

Erasmus grinned and asked, "Enjoy the style? I adore it. But let's forget about my own literary tastes. The report crushed him. It was so severe that everyone realized what it meant. Diocletian was impenetrable. He sur-

veyed the hall like a lion, his muzzle on his paws; he seemed to be asking, *Which of you dares?* He no longer listened to Malvolio. You remember how he used to talk to him—as if he were a lackey? But who laughed last? Old Malvolio. And to think that it was Diocletian who dug him up when he was an assistant editor at Radio Moscow and made him what he is, step by step! The Revolution's like Saturn, it devours its children; but its children are like certain primitive tribes that eat their mother and father: you raise yourselves on the corpses of your protectors. In the hall, no one moved. Were they afraid of him? Of murder?"

Two years before, at the beginning of the thaw, they had sentenced and shot another one of their colleagues for caution's sake. I didn't enjoy Erasmus' cynical tone. Nothing was sacred to him and he enjoyed flouting everything. But I wanted to know what had happened. I gave him some more to drink and made him go on: "The leader," he said, "stood up again and asked if anyone wanted the floor. They still didn't move. Apparently in the good old days of lapidation, there was a moment's pause before the first stone. But there's always someone to give free rein to his hatred, or his fear, or his cruelty. It was that bulldog Paraschiv Ionesco who spoke first. He did so with a ferocity I didn't expect, even from him. He used to be Diocletian's subordinate: that may have been why. Everyone was frozen with horror, but everyone listened. Paraschiv no longer called him anything but *D. Sava:* this contraction was like a gumdrop in his mouth, after twelve years of respect and 'Comrade Diocletian'; he embroidered on the themes of *morbid attitude, the physiognomy of a Party member, vileness,* and

hypocrisy. He rejoiced in the power of being able to insult him freely at last; I even think that D. Sava was the beneficiary of several other hatreds stored up and simmered by the Bulldog, hatreds he hadn't been able to discharge in the faces of those who had inspired them. The others sputtered pathetically, completely abject. The leader wasn't very pleased, but the goal was achieved, and enthusiasm mattered less. Malvolio was grave and unctuous. I love that man. He's perfect. You know, little Zodie wants to write a Demonology and put Malvolio in the first chapter: *the Devil of State*? He's ecclesiastical enough; but D. Sava was even more ecclesiastical. He was beautiful. He growled out with dignity:

" 'I shall reflect most carefully on the criticisms that have been made, as any Communist censured by the Party must reflect.'

"He was great. He was a priest. The High Priest alluding to Amon-Ra, who has indicated his wrath by an eclipse. He pointed the tip of his finger at the Bulldog.

" 'I reject the frivolous tone of the criticisms made by this comrade; but what he has said will make me reflect. I wish to account to the Party for all that I have done, every last gesture. But I cannot acknowledge criticisms so grave merely for form's sake, and still less merely to reject them. I ask the leaders of the Party for a postponement in order to analyze them and adopt a seriously self-critical and responsible position, as is a Communist's duty.'

"Pretty strong, wasn't it? I've seen other men in such situations: they lose their heads, cavil over details, suffer

a kind of mental *capitis diminutio.* But not Diocletian. He was great, that's what he was; he was magnificent. Amon-Ra was not pleased. However, a few knife-thrusts delivered by Malvolio made him smile a little. Afterward Amon-Ra himself took the floor to summarize the discussions. He read out a text typewritten and prepared days ahead of time. No, D. Sava's self-criticism was not satisfactory. D. Sava had attempted to evade the responsibility of his grave *weaknesses* (not even *errors: weaknesses* is more insulting). It was proposed (Amon-Ra doesn't propose, *it was proposed,* quite abstractly, but the police, the Security Service, and the Army are behind *it*) it was proposed, therefore, to expel D. Sava from the Politburo and from the Central Committee. Those in favor were requested to raise their hands. Those against? No one. Those abstaining? No one. D. Sava was unanimously expelled. *It* was proposed to replace him within the Politburo by Comrade Malvolio Leonte. Those in favor were requested to raise their hands.

"And there we were. D. Sava finished. He has been appointed director of a minor branch of the State Bank."

After this conversation with my friend Erasmus Ionesco, I saw Diocletian once more, during one of the terrible meetings of 1958. Still tall and heavy and strong, but his face shrunken. No one spoke to him. No one sat down next to him. Nor did he speak to anyone. He had lost a few pounds. But the great Anna Pauker, after her own fall, grew hollow-cheeked, her eyes sank deep in their sockets, and she lost twenty pounds in three days. Diocletian Sava took it better.

The meeting I am talking about was held in a former movie theater. No one spoke to his neighbor. Mortal enemies greeted each other warmly, each afraid the mere fact the other man had seen him might incite him to denunciation—but the other man was similarly terrorized, similarly polite. It was hot; everyone was drenched with sweat. The expulsions had already been unanimously voted, one man had had an epileptic fit, and the votes of censure and admonition rained down. Malvolio Leonte presided, Paraschiv the Bulldog on his right, little Erasmus (who had the same last name as Paraschiv but wasn't related to him) on his left. They screamed into the microphones. They asked questions that were accusations. On the stand, the speakers stammered, got confused, made excuses, whispering their *mea culpas* or barking out fierce charges. The hall voted unanimously, laughed, trembled with fear, and sweated. I'll never forget one poor devil who was slobbering into the microphones when someone in the hall stood up and yelled:

"You have blown the trumpets of imperialism!"

"No!" the man on the tribunal screamed. "I haven't blown the trumpets of . . ."

"You've blown them!"

"No, I haven't . . ."

"Blown!"

"Haven't!"

"Yes you have!"

"No I haven't!"

There was laughter, but all eyes were fixed on the leaders: maybe no one should have laughed. Malvolio was smiling. He was completely at his ease, far above

the battle. Amon-Ra had smiled on him. That's why he decided he must serve the master. I suddenly heard his voice roaring over the loudspeaker:

"What does Comrade D. Sava find to say to this? Come, comrade, let us hear what answer you have to this."

The tone was sarcastic, deliberately wounding. Overcoming my exhaustion I opened my eyes and saw Diocletian Sava upon the tribunal, turning his prematurely whitened head toward the members of the presidium. He spoke calmly, almost serenely, which contrasted strangely with the horrible excitation of the assembly and the screaming voices transformed by hatred, anger, or fear:

"I was convinced, as I still am, that the measures in question were just."

"Have you nothing to say concerning the criticisms addressed to you during the plenary session of the Central Committee? Do you consider your self-criticism satisfactory?"

The question was an obvious trap, but impossible to avoid. Diocletian, facing the hall like an actor in classical comedy, replied calmly, with a nicely disguised pride and scorn:

"Comrades, I believe that the questions discussed in a plenary session of the Central Committee must be resolved at the same level. It is other questions which are to be discussed here."

This was a masterful correction. The hall fell silent. Diocletian waited for another question, glanced at the presidium. The presidium was silent too. Diocletian left

the stand, passed down the middle of the hall, and returned to his place between two empty seats.

Recently, a woman friend of mine, vice-president of the Partisans for Peace, said to me:

"Imagine whom I found myself sitting next to this morning, in the Great National Assembly? I was late, and looking around for an empty chair. There was only one. I sat down in it, and I got a shock: I was next to Diocletian Sava. Which made me realize why there was an empty chair. During the intermission, I tried to talk to him: I'm too old, and the Party knows me too well: I could risk it. But it was like talking to a wall. 'Yes.' 'No.' Or not even that. He made it perfectly clear: 'All right, old lady, let me alone, I don't want anything to do with you.' I left him alone. Do you know what he was doing? Algebra. And he's grown so fat, his back is monstrously broad now, and with that huge head of his, so silent and cold—brrr!"

As she talked I was thinking about the look in Shulamite's eyes, about her smile. Diocletian has never had anything to do with other women. One of their children died at the age of nine from an appendicitis operation: shock, or infection. Diocletian had been a terrible man. At Anna's fall, it was he who had read the report, as Malvolio read his. And Anna had brought him up like a son: the machinery of destiny rewards cruelty with suffering and sadness. Shulamite was all he had. Powerful, almost omnipotent, he never glanced at the secretaries, the file clerks, the actresses; others had their little adventures, but he never gave a look, a smile—nothing. And were they sleeping together now, he and Shula-

mite? Or was Diocletian too suffering from the emasculation caused by disgrace and collapse? I don't know. I haven't seen them recently. He was free. It was my friend Prospero Dobre who tried to see him. Ever since the crisis in 1958, Prospero had been persecuted, censured, criticized; his works were banned and he was treated as a *non-Marxist, a revisionist, an idealist influenced by bourgeois ideology*. And yet, in a recent meeting, he had spoken with a crude oversimplification; so he had yielded, he was broken. Or else he had become encysted, like certain rudimentary creatures, in order to survive until a more favorable period; but among human beings this never happens without leaving traces. I didn't suspect what he was planning. He too had grown fat—with anguish; his proud tragedian's face was swollen now. To find out whether he had actually been brought to this by fear and rage, or if he had remained as I had known and loved him, I asked him:

"Well, have you finished your essay on the Mechanics of Revolutions?"

He stared at me hard; I realized that he was afraid of me, and I added quickly, to reassure him:

"I know about it from someone who respects you a great deal."

And I reminded him of the evening when Diocletian had taken him home in his car, and of Malvolio Leonte's joke. Prospero Dobre laughed.

"Yes, and our good Malvolio has been busy with me ever since. He's letting me breathe; he's convinced of my insignificance, and of my submission. You know, I've sold my library."

"That's too bad."

"Yes, it's too bad," he murmured with a faintly ironic expression, which I understood later when I learned that he had been sent on a scientific mission to the West and had stayed there.

"And your essay?"

"I finished it," he said, giving me a sharp look. He wanted to be sure of my discretion. It was a time when we all avoided each other, when whole groups of friends and acquaintances were pulverizing each other. Finally, he confided in me:

"I gave Diocletian a copy of it to read."

"You dared?"

"He encouraged me when he was powerful, and I'm grateful to him. I admire him. He's a great man."

I said nothing. I didn't want to express any opinion whatever: I had learned not to express any, during the last two years. Prospero said:

"I went to his house in broad daylight, my text under my arm. He lives in a big dilapidated house with a sentry box that's rotting to pieces in front of it. No policeman there any more, no more cars, no bodyguard. I rang. No answer. I rang again. From inside, a woman's voice asked suspiciously, 'Who's there?' The door opened and a little girl appeared—she looked like Diocletian. The woman—it was Shulamite, I recognized her voice—never appeared. I caught a whiff of vile-smelling cooking—that was all. I gave the manuscript and a note to the little girl and went away."

That was the last thing I heard about Shulamite. Discreet, invisible as always. She exists for no one. But she exists for Diocletian. "Kiss me with the kiss of thy

mouth"? There are moments when the kiss of no mouth has any taste. But in such moments, she is beside him. "Thy breasts are like towers"? Breasts fall and no longer delight the lover's fingers. But the heart! Thy heart, my refuge: thy heart, the lion's den.

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CHAPTER

2

I

The first to fall, after Diocletian Sava, should have been his right-hand man, Alfred Anania. Alfred Anania, moreover, had an even greater blemish than that of having been Diocletian's right-hand man, a taint still blacker, if it was possible. But no, he is far from being lost: he is now the creature of Malvolio Leonte. How many have hated or hate him to despair, how many would like to see him responsible for the sale of cabbages, director of a sovkhoze in some muddy village, or even shut up in a snug little cell, confined in the dark and waiting for a nice little galloping consumption or a heart attack! But no, Alfred Anania still has the same post, a key post; no one can avoid his surveillance, and

as auditor he can push people to the point of despair: he doesn't miss many opportunities to do so. For years, they've tried to get rid of him: impossible. Where does he get this unshakable power? From the love Ligeia bore him. I knew her: a strange creature, dwarfed, flat-chested, without waist or buttocks, her legs heavy and short—she looked like a tree trunk. Her face was red, as if perpetually congested by fury. She had masculine features, or rather, nonfeminine, neuter features, the features of a clumsy young boy. The poor creature knew what she looked like and suffered horribly, as she revealed by a permanent and subliminal rage. I met her at the mountain villa confiscated for the auditing service; here they seemed like one big happy family, as good-humored as if they were at an office party, inwardly furious not to be able to get away from each other, even on vacation. This was twelve years ago, or maybe fifteen, and I was twenty-five; I was what I am no longer, a good-looking boy. I note this only to explain why Ligeia gave me her hand so resentfully, with the look of someone boiling over with anger. Anything that didn't look like a tree trunk threw her into a violent rage. I understand her, and I forgive her; may she also forgive me if she has being and consciousness, wherever she is.

Alfred Anania, on the contrary, is an effeminate man, delicately built, his nose thin and slightly aquiline, his mouth small, his eyes soft and brown, his hair a little too long—the artist type. He wears a little mustache which, instead of making him look virile (which is impossible, for virility is a matter of expression and bearing), seems artificial. Frail and sensitive, his complexion ivory, his hair tousled, a little clown's mustache, and the

face of a girl—that is the sinister Alfred Anania, ideological terrorist and executioner-theoretician at the orders of Malvolio Leonte. The justice of destiny, in which no one believes and which no one can avoid, rewards in advance: in God's eyes there is no Before nor After. No one wonders, "Why do I suffer now? What does it mean?" I am trying, in all humility, to guess at the justice of God; if Ligeia had asked, "Why am I hideous, why do I look like a tree trunk?" perhaps He would have answered her, "Because you are harsh and proud, and because instead of teaching you love and humility, suffering has made you rear up like a serpent someone has stepped on: you are paid in advance." I dare not say this would be God's judgment; but it is possible. And because she suffered so, God permitted her to die satisfied —in her own way. And if it was Alfred Anania who asked, "Why do I suffer?" the answer might well be, "You do not suffer. You are afraid, it's true, but you have made so many people suffer that you must still pay: wait." For destiny rewards and punishes us through ourselves and through each other. These two, through each other.

They had met during the underground period, in the room of a sympathizer who was out of town for two days: a door on the courtyard, a dark closet at the rear, with a ladder going up to the attic, where an opening led out onto another courtyard behind the house, provided you jumped down. The red sun set cold as metal above the barracks and the arsenal; in the Strada Uranus a battalion of police in Prussian helmets—O Bucharest of my childhood, horse-tail helmets, bayonets!—was marching with a great clatter of boots: blue overcoats, bluish

bayonets, black walls, red sky. Alfred Anania had let himself in with the owner's key, and was watching through the shutters. A woman appeared, walking clumsily, without any feminine suppleness. She looked up and down the street, furtively, with animal alertness. Then she ducked into the courtyard, walked up the little stoop, knocked at the door: three quick raps, two slow ones, three quick ones. Alfred Anania opened the door, the woman came in, he locked the door behind her. Standing in the darkness, between the table with a plush cloth on it, the marble-topped commode with its crockery bowl, the high bed with its many cushions, they stared at each other. They were almost the same height. They had never seen each other before.

"My name is Laura," she said. He shook her hand and said:

"Hello. Mine's Anthony."

They were lying; that was a rule during the underground period. For years, they slept together and neither knew the other's name. That first evening, they arranged their next meeting. They spoke in whispers in the now complete darkness, like two very intimate friends or like two lovers. Then they decided to separate. Alfred Anania looked through the shutters: the light striped his face. Ligeia's was in the shadow. Alfred Anania said:

"Come here."

She came closer and looked too; he felt her round hard shoulder against him. On the sidewalk, a man with his hands in his overcoat pockets was walking up and down in front of the house.

"How could they know?" she murmured.

"Maybe they just suspect. Otherwise they'd come for us," he said. He was cold with fear. But at the same time he savored the danger and his own fear.

"I'm going up to the attic to see what's on the other side," he continued. He went through the closet, climbed the ladder, and came back:

"No one. They don't know about the other way out."

"Let's get out of here," she whispered. He made a movement. She pulled at his sleeve.

"No. If a comrade comes here, they'll let him get inside and then they'll force their way in. Let's wait here. If someone comes, we'll go together." Alfred Anania swallowed his saliva, but said nothing. The girl was right. Then he said:

"All right, but you leave now."

Another silence. She said in a low furious voice:

"I have no place to sleep tonight."

He looked at her. He saw her eyes gleaming in the darkness and her face striped with black and white bars. Her mouth was in the light: the thick mouth of a thirteen-year-old boy.

"All right," Alfred Anania said. "We'll both stay here."

They watched the policeman outside for a long time. Then they sat down on their straw chairs. From time to time they looked out the window. Once the girl said:

"Here comes another one."

Alfred Anania said:

"They're changing shifts."

They watched for a long time. Finally the girl yawned. Alfred Anania said:

"Lie down. I'll stay here on this chair."

She answered in her voice that was too loud, and in a brutal tone:

"You can lie here beside me. You're not going to rape me, after all."

"Be serious," he said clumsily. "Are we comrades or not?"

They remained on their chairs for quite a while longer; a third man took the shift. Finally they lay down side by side, fully dressed. They took off only their shoes. Alfred Anania, lying on his back, his eyes closed, listened to the girl's breathing. She wasn't sleeping: she was breathing too rapidly for that. "I don't like her," he was telling himself. "She's ugly." But he was twenty, and had been with women only very rarely: he was too timid, too poor, and besides he lived in hiding, pursued by the Secret Police. He felt the warmth of the girl's body, though a certain distance separated them. She was breathing with difficulty. Alfred Anania felt a kind of despair. He raised himself up on one elbow and let himself fall on top of her. She didn't even stir. But she embraced his ribs and held him fast, close to her. The light fell in stripes across the girl's face, but Alfred Anania saw her gaze, fixed, gleaming, threatening. When he penetrated her, she closed her eyes and made a face. She continued to make faces like grimaces of pain, and to groan. But she held him in her arms that were like a hoop of iron.

II

After that, Alfred Anania's timidity and sexual starvation, but most of all Ligeia's will and passion, kept them together, except during the periods—sometimes whole months—when missions in the provinces separated them, or when one of them had a particularly secret task and had to disappear. But after the fall of Marshal Antonesco and the entry of the Soviet troops, they remained together as man and wife and became increasingly important figures, he especially. The Office of Requisitions confiscated for them an ivy-covered house with French windows up to the ceiling; between the living room and the marble-floored dining room was a wide arch with a wrought-iron gate. Everything was still in the house: the silk draperies at the windows, the dishes and the silver, the bedsheets, closets full of clothes: the owners had fled to Switzerland. It is in this house, to which he has added only a television set, that Alfred Anania still lives today. The official car waits in front of the door. Until 1949, the latest-model Buick. In 1953, it was replaced by a Pobeda whose looks were against it: this moment coincided with a crisis in Alfred Anania's career. Since then the car has been an enormous ministerial Zim, and when the chauffeur is off duty another replaces him with a 1954 Cadillac. On hunting trips in the mountains or fishing expeditions to Lake Sunagov, Alfred Anania uses a Pobeda or an Opel. He is the director of an important bureau, which is outwardly expressed by the makes of the pool of cars at his disposal. He himself, of course, dresses badly, chooses ugly ties, and wears not white but gray checked or striped

shirts. The Ananias entertained in the enormous house only when they had to give grand and indigestible dinners which ended in the early hours of the morning. The rest of the time the couple lunched in their offices, ate sandwiches during work hours, and saw each other only late in the evening, exhausted by endless conferences. Consequently Ligeia realized too late that their conjugal relations had grown increasingly rare and finally ceased altogether. Moreover, Alfred was no Hercules; even at the beginning they saw each other rarely, and Ligeia was so happy each time that she was able to make a kind of hoard of her happiness. She had no other experience, consequently no suspicions. And then, they were extremely busy, they were decorated, they were invited to formal gatherings and to political trials, they spoke with passion in meetings, they were appointed to official delegations. Alfred grew white, gained twenty pounds, was always in good humor, even jovial, clapped the shoulders of his equals or inferiors, laughed noisily but not gaily. Ligeia confined herself to a rare smile, was extremely reserved, extremely silent. He thought she wasn't noticing anything. But once when they happened to be lunching together she asked him:

"Listen, is something bothering you?"

"No, nothing. Why?"

"I just wondered. I thought you might be angry with me."

"No, of course not," he said, looking out the window down the long row of poplars, where a policeman in a long coat was walking. "Why? Aren't we comrades? I'd tell you."

"Maybe you're tired of me," she said.

"Now, let's be serious," he said with a laugh, and he came over to clap her on the shoulder. But she raised her red face toward him; even the whites of her eyes were red; she said:

"Then why do you sleep with your secretary?"

"Where did you get such a notion?"

"That's my business. Why don't you look me in the eye?"

He shrugged his shoulders, furious:

"What nonsense! Look you in the eye! You're simply and stupidly jealous. You've still got the bourgeois instinct of ownership!"

He laughed bitterly. She was stubborn:

"It's not the instinct of ownership. It's proletarian morality. If you're tired of me, say so honestly."

This time he glanced at her quickly, then said:

"Let's be serious. You're getting all upset over nothing."

"Then do you promise to drop this woman?"

She looked at him hard. He was walking up and down the room. Exasperated, he exclaimed:

"But there's nothing to drop! There's nothing, I tell you!"

She compressed her lips, and this time she too looked out the window. Alfred went to his office. He came back very late. Ligeia was in bed, covered up to the armpits, her arms out on the blanket. She hadn't turned out the light.

"Well, how did it go?"

"The usual questions. The sowing campaign . . ."

She said nothing, compressed her lips. He climbed into bed, turning his back to her, and said:

"Well, good night. Aren't you going to turn out the light?"

Ligeia turned out the light without a word. She didn't fall asleep. She had called every office for him and hadn't found him.

One day, after a work session—a real one this time—in Diocletian Sava's office, the latter asked Alfred Anania to stay on. He cordially shook the others' hands (heads of departments, two ministers, three secretaries of Party committees) after having drawn conclusions that clearly indicated the prompt dismissal of two of the men present. Their faces had gone yellow; Diocletian shook their hands with the same robust kindliness he had shown to the others. Alone with Alfred Anania in his enormous office, Diocletian sat down again behind his desk, his head huge and gray between his enormous shoulders.

"Listen," he said. "Ligeia came to see me. She's very upset. And I'm not pleased either. But I'm surprised. I didn't expect such a thing from you."

"I don't understand, Comrade Diocletian," Alfred Anania said, outwardly calm.

"Yes, you understand perfectly. What's this business about a secretary? You have love affairs? And in your own department besides? Don't you have a wife? You're married! I can't understand. Explain it to me."

"It's hard for me, Comrade Diocletian," Alfred said reluctantly.

"I believe you there. If you were an ordinary man, I'd understand: you're tired of your wife, you want to

play around a little. It's common enough. Marx has pointed out the commercial nature of bourgeois marriage—it's actually polygamy. But you?"

"Comrade Diocletian, let me speak frankly."

"I forbid you to speak any other way. That's a good one! You're in the Party's own house. We're both Communists. How else would we speak, if not frankly?"

"Yes, of course . . . How shall I put it? I'm a man, like anyone else, and . . . and this madness overcame me. You've put your finger on the sore spot: poor Ligeia isn't exactly a beauty . . . and it's been so many years . . ."

He felt his chief freeze, and stopped. Diocletian said, in a tone too cold to be paternal and too earnest to be merely didactic:

"You have no reason to speak this way. Did you choose Ligeia for her beauty? You should have picked a music-hall dancer. Not a beauty, you say? She's a good comrade, politically she's pure as crystal. You share an ideal, a great cause for which you both live. Is that nothing? Marriage between two Communists must be a magnificent thing. Why are you bothering about such superficial qualities? Just think what the most beautiful woman in the world will look like in ten years. A wreck. Or else she'll be still beautiful, but infamous. Ligeia's on another plane, humanly speaking. She's a comrade. That girl, your secretary—I don't know her. I can't judge her. But I doubt if she's comparable to Ligeia. There's no discussion possible there. And you, a Party militant, losing your head over a little girl . . . no, it's not right. You'll be criticized by the Party."

That was the great threat. A man like Diocletian Sava

never talked just to hear himself talk, and when he warned you of a danger, you had to submit in order not to expose yourself to it.

"Is that how you look at this whole business?" Diocletian continued. "You think we should leave our companions because they're growing old, or because we've seen women who are more beautiful?"

And he smiled with a benign irony that suggested a terrible ferocity underneath. Alfred Anania stammered:

"Of course, I know you're right, I must think it over and control myself. I had a momentary weakness . . ."

"Don't you see that these are *petit-bourgeois* vestiges in your consciousness?" Diocletian asked. Alfred Anania trembled and answered quickly:

"Yes, of course, I shall have to make a serious analysis of myself and liquidate any residue of this kind for good. I must consider my position in this matter self-critically."

"After all," Diocletian went on, "you have a responsibility toward this girl—I'm referring to your secretary. What must she think of the quality of a member of the Party when she sees you, a Party militant since underground days, entrusted with a task of grave responsibility, trying to sleep with her? You should educate her, raise her political level, instead of exploiting her the way a capitalist boss exploits his salaried wage slaves. This situation must be cleaned up. Do you agree?"

"Yes, of course, I must put a stop to it, I promise to break it off," Alfred Anania said. Diocletian Sava grew calm again and spoke of other matters. Alfred realized that his chief was about to give him still more responsibility, still greater power. Moreover, if he didn't sub-

mit, Diocletian would crush him. He left late and did not go home, but to his secretary's apartment. He felt that something inside himself was breaking at the thought of separating from this girl. "Only tonight, just once, to say good-by," he told himself. He had decided to obey Diocletian's orders. But he stayed with her until morning.

The next day, Ligeia said nothing. "I must break off with her," Alfred Anania repeated to himself, for during the night he had realized his inability to give up this liaison. "Cleanly, honestly, like two Communists." But he didn't dare. He was a little afraid of Ligeia. So he began to sleep away from home. He no longer had a clear head, he made mistakes at the office, but he was still strong enough to run risks.

One morning, Ligeia's Pobeda stopped in front of a huge apartment building in the Strada Maria Rosetti. Ligeia climbed out, told the driver to wait, and went inside. It was six in the morning, a cold, dry November morning. Ligeia wore her hair cut short like Anna Pauker's, a heavy cloth coat with padded shoulders, flat-heeled shoes, wool-lined gloves. She went up to the sixth floor and rang. Someone opened the door; Ligeia walked into the tiny vestibule past a fresh-faced girl in a night-gown. When the girl recognized this red-faced intruder, she grew pale. Without a word, Ligeia strode into the next room, the bed-sitting room. Alfred Anania, his pajama top open over a hairy chest unrelated to his extremely modest virility, jumped out of bed and began to button up. The secretary had mechanically followed Ligeia into the room. Ligeia turned around and suddenly, with a gesture that exploded like dynamite,

slapped her twice. The girl swayed on her feet, raised her hands to her cheeks, and stood petrified, eyes wide, mouth open. Ligeia hissed:

"And you, get dressed immediately."

Alfred's face changed, and he said in a choked voice:

"Are you crazy? What's got into you, you filthy beast?"

But Ligeia was talking to the girl:

"Is this how you respect proletarian morality? Do you think the Party will allow this? You prostitute yourself for money? Or to get promoted? You don't expect me to believe you like him, I hope. You're twenty, and his hair's almost white. Do you happen to think he's handsome, by any chance?" she asked with a kind of naïve curiosity, glancing at Alfred, whom she found more than handsome: to her he was the only man in the world.

"Get out of here!" Alfred Anania shouted with forced anger—he was a little scared. "Out! I've had enough of you. More than enough. You disgust me! I'll never come back to the house again!"

She looked at him, her eyes cloudy in her red, swollen face, and said:

"Yes, you'll come back."

"Get out right this minute!" he screamed. He was beside himself. "And apologize to her. Get out of here, you monster!"

Ligeia looked at the girl and said to her with that firmness that alarmed her husband:

"Will you go into the other room? Leave us alone."

The girl went into the bathroom. Ligeia turned toward her husband, who was pale, trembling, his fists clenched. For the first time in her life, Ligeia didn't think he was handsome. She didn't like him. But what

bound her to him was much too old and much too strong: the desire to possess the being, the individuality, the Self of her prey. It is enough for the other person to exist—one must master him, engulf him.

"Get out of here!" he shrieked. "I've had enough of you! I've never been able to stand you! I've slept with you because I had to, because I had nothing better. Just look at yourself! You're a horror, a monster! Let me alone, please, take pity on me! I want to begin a clean, healthy life, have children with this girl, not be tortured the way I am now, with you! I can't bear it any longer, I can't bear it, do you hear me, I can't bear it, I can't bear it!"

She was purple now, and watching him with eyes of stone. With great difficulty she managed to get out:

"The Party won't let you."

"I'll explain it to them, they'll understand me! I'll roll on the ground, I'll get sick—I don't want this adultery, I want a separation from you, I want to be through with you, I want to be rid of you!"

He was shouting hysterically. Ligeia said with great effort:

"Listen. When we studied the old Secret Police files in 1949, I was on the committee. I found your dossier as an agent of the royal Secret Police."

Alfred Anania looked at the bathroom door. Ligeia whispered:

"I took the papers and put them in my pocket. No one knows. Only me."

Alfred Anania sat down on the edge of the bed. He began to wipe his face with his pajama sleeve. Ligeia watched him, went to the vestibule and picked up his

coat, and put it around his shoulders. She said, almost gently:

"Come on, we'll go home now."

He let her drape the coat over his pajamas. The girl waiting in the bathroom heard no voices, just the door slamming; she came out and found her chief's underwear and clothes on a chair. The next day, she was transferred to another department.

The husband and wife never spoke again of the secret that bound them together. One day, Ligeia asked her husband:

"Look, why don't we have a child?"

He attempted a lustful smile, and said:

"Well, let's try!"

He embraced her, mastering his disgust. She clutched him to her the way drowning persons are supposed to clutch the unwary rescuer. After a few months, Ligeia was pregnant, for the first time in her life, at the age of thirty-eight. The doctor at the Central Committee clinic didn't seem enthusiastic, but he saw how much she wanted to be a mother. The delivery was long and difficult; no one brought the child in for Ligeia to see. She was kept under sedation and finally told that the child had had a heart defect and had not survived. Ligeia merely asked:

"Was it a boy?"

"Yes, a boy," the doctor said. "Don't let this upset you. You'll have another. Just try."

Several months passed without Alfred's resuming conjugal relations with Ligeia. One night, after a party at the Albanian embassy where they had eaten and drunk a great deal, they went to bed and Ligeia pressed herself

against him. Alfred did not react: he was on the point of falling asleep. She caressed him. Gently he pushed away her hand.

"Let me alone, darling, I'm tired."

"Come on," Ligeia whispered.

"No hurry, there's plenty of time, tomorrow . . ." he said in a mild tone of voice. She whispered:

"Do you know it's over four months?"

"Go on. It can't be!"

"It's more. Almost five," she whispered, and she began to caress his member. But soon she pushed the inert flesh away and said coldly:

"You're not even a man any longer."

"No, that's not it, I'm tired," he said pathetically.

"After five months rest? You've gone soft. You're not a man any more! At forty-five! It's disgusting."

He said nothing.

"You're a wreck. Not even good in bed. I'll ask the Party for permission to divorce. I need a man, not a eunuch."

He still said nothing.

"Why don't you answer? What's the matter with you? Are you sick? Have you grown so old?" (She would never want another man; it was Alfred she wanted and no one else in the world. Alfred, burning with humiliation, didn't even suspect it was she who suffered most, much more than he.)

"I may have aged," he stammered.

"Go on, at your age! It's the age when men are most virile! Maybe you have another secretary?"

Alarmed by her suspicious and threatening tone, he exclaimed:

"No, of course I don't!"

As a matter of fact, he had no mistress. But how make Ligeia believe it? It was true: he no longer felt any physical desires. But how make her believe it? Inspired by fear, he suddenly found the way. With a secret joy it took all his strength to conceal, he said very gravely:

"My dearest, you know, I've probably suffered a kind of nervous shock: I swear to you, I feel nothing at all there, it's as if I were castrated."

"A shock? What shock?"

"I think it was the child."

There was a pause.

"Why the child?"

"Well . . . You know, I've never told you, but I don't want you to suspect me, and you have to understand, it couldn't help but give me a shock . . . Really, you didn't know about it?"

"What about the child? What was it?"

"You haven't guessed?"

"No, tell me, tell me now," she said harshly.

"Well . . . it was malformed, you see . . . it . . . it didn't have any . . ."

She didn't move, didn't breathe. Finally she asked:

"Any what?"

"Any head," Alfred Anania murmured.

Ligeia suddenly turned over in the bed, like a fish thrown on dry ground; then she lay motionless. Alfred Anania apologized nervously and went on explaining. Inwardly, he grew calm: he had struck hard and well. He had nothing more to fear.

"Don't be sad," he concluded. "We'll have another."

He knew they wouldn't. They never spoke of it again.

They never had carnal relations again. About a year later, Ligeia felt ill and went to see a doctor. She had cancer. They didn't tell her.

III

She died in the Central Committee hospital. After the first operation, the surgeons discovered there was nothing they could do, sewed her up again, and kept her under sedation. But she finally realized what was happening to her. For the first time in her life, she grew gentle; she was kind to the nurses; her harshness and rage left her; her face was only faintly pink.

Alfred Anania did all he could to try to save her; but his reaction, when he was told there was no hope, was a manly one, as a Communist's must be.

Two or three days before her death, Ligeia sent for an old friend; they had worked together in the underground days, and now the friend was a member of the Cadres Commission of the Central Committee: all the dossiers, all the secrets, all the past. The friend remained alone with the dying woman for a quarter of an hour, left, returned two hours later. Ligeia was waiting for her. She had refused to take a sedative. She needed to be clearheaded. She stared greedily at her friend:

"Did you see Malvolio?"

"Yes, I told him everything. I couldn't tell what he thought. You know him. Then I gave him the papers. He took them without looking at them and put them on the desk, face down."

Ligeia smiled faintly:

"Just like him. The image of discretion. He's understood nothing, he can swear he's seen nothing. But I can rest now. He doesn't like Diocletian, and Alfred is Diocletian's man."

If you struck Diocletian's man you struck Diocletian. Both of them knew that. The other woman said:

"I've done my duty."

She was speaking to her conscience. Ligeia told her:

"Thank you, my dear. Good-by."

And she looked at her with a friendly affection she had never shown before. At that moment, Alfred Anania came in quietly. He greeted them. The friend made no answer and left. Ligeia smiled at her husband. The whites of her eyes were grayish, her cheeks drawn, her nose pinched, her complexion yellow; her arms on the blanket were as slender as those of a ten-year-old child.

"How do you feel?"

"Happy," she said. "So are you."

"Why do you talk that way?"

"Because it's true," Ligeia sighed. "You're happy to be rid of me at last. You can hire a pretty secretary and get married now. . . ."

"Why torment yourself like this?" he asked sadly. "Have you still not forgiven me?"

She looked at him pensively. Her eyes filled with tears. She whispered:

"I've loved you a great deal."

He lowered his eyes, troubled and surprised to see her—*her*—crying.

"You know," Ligeia continued in a choked voice, "I had your papers here. I sent them to the Party. To Malvolio—he's fond of you."

His face changed its expression, his mouth opened without uttering a sound. And she looked at him with love and grief and hatred in her eyes; the tears ran down her cheeks that were yellow with sickness. Alfred raised his fists and whispered:

"You bitch! You damned bitch!"

He left the room. She was crying. The nurse found her with her face wet with tears. She smiled at the nurse, who gave her morphine and watched her fall asleep.

Alfred Anania fell ill and never saw her again. Moreover, she had no further completely lucid moments. She was cremated, and that was over.

But Alfred Anania recovered and was very discreet, very prudent, tormented by fear. He contributed secretly and publicly to the fall of his chief, Diocletian Sava. I saw him on the stand, speaking violently, his eyes fixed on Diocletian:

"The Party, comrades, is wiser than the ambitious men who seek their own advantage under the mask of political service! One wonders, comrades, what D. Sava wanted. We, who were working with him, are guilty of not having seen what was happening in good time, and of not warning the Party about it! I ask to be severely punished!"

Diocletian stared straight ahead into space. Then he turned his head contemptuously and looked out the window at the trees.

At the presidium table, Malvolio Leonte listened gravely. He looked like a kind *baba* from Bessarabia, but also like a gangster truck driver. These two faces appeared upon his own or faded into it almost imperceptibly. Now he was impenetrable.

No one ever heard of the papers that had been sent to him. The friend of the deceased did not mention them; she even forgot them. And Alfred Anania's career continued, to everyone's surprise. He is stronger than ever, and played, as will be seen, an appropriate role in my story.

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CHAPTER

3

I

The fall of Diocletian Sava was the signal for a storm which lasted two years. Each generation submerges the preceding one, as layers of fresh lava cover those that have cooled and turned to stone. New kinds of potentates take the places occupied by former rulers, who have grown old and poor, and whose desiccated roots no longer plunge deep into the masses. In revolutions, this happens more rapidly (the difference between revolution and nonrevolution, Prospero Dobre says, is only a matter of rhythm); this is why social species have no time to grow old and die a natural death: they are torn to pieces by other species that come to take their place.

Similarly, deep in the ocean, new layers of water grow warm, forming rising currents. The appearance of a new society is as irreversible and as ineluctable as an Ice Age. Lions and horses die of the cold or flee southward before the ice that advances from one year to the next, from one winter to the next, always farther. The species imprisoned on peninsulas or islands die of cold. And in the arctic forest, only the bear, the reindeer, and the polar fox survive.

It was the same with us: from the Hungarian insurrection to the end of 1959, I have seen species which fled southward—westward—species which died in poverty and social insignificance, and species which adapted themselves. Like certain animals that develop a pelage they originally lacked, people changed, grew more secret, more withdrawn, abandoned certain velleities of individual independence and critical spirit, or of culture, of personal accomplishment, of external success. They shriveled, like boreal vegetation. And the glacial animals began to multiply, the new chiefs, differing in physical type and in characteristics of soul and spirit: knowing the Western languages less and less, increasingly dominated by the instinct of secret or frenzied opposition to the Whore of Babylon, to the abomination of the merchants—like the opposition of the peasants of Asia Minor to Rome, and of the nomad shepherds to the China of the Sungs.

The process of dismemberment had already reached its peak by the spring of 1958. I remember a Party conference in a great stifling hall, where cigarette smoke and the smell of sweat thickened the air suffocatingly. My friend Prospero Dobre was on the stand, obliged to answer

questions. In the general exhaustion and overexcitement, a man stood up and asked aggressively:

"Will the speaker say whether he has used documents from bourgeois archives?"

Prospero, pale, his huge convex forehead covered with tiny drops of sweat, stared out into space, dazed. It was the twenty-first question. Malvolio Leonte was enthroned at the red-draped table, between the ministers, the Party militants, and the President of the Academy of Sciences, flanked by Alfred Anania and Erasmus Ionesco, an old friend of Prospero's and of mine too—but who could tell, by now? Malvolio was animated and cheerful, and kept receiving notes from the hall, calling on speakers, interrupting, asking ironic, insulting, or accusing questions.

"Is it painful for you to reply?" Malvolio Leonte asked; he was laughing like a malicious old crone. The loudspeakers thundered his question. The hall burst into insane, hysterical laughter—even those who had been tortured fifteen minutes before were laughing. Prospero frowned and answered:

"I have studied the archives. Moreover, they were the only documents available."

"What? Don't the Party resolutions exist?" Alfred Anania exclaimed. A heavy, irritated murmur ran through the hall. Arthur Zodie, who was sitting beside me, whispered in my ear:

"Malvolio can't stand Prospero. The poor boy's finished. . . ."

"The Party resolutions are different. I needed telegrams, letters, scientific materials to prove my thesis," Prospero Dobre said. In the hall, the nervousness in-

creased. Prospero wasn't playing the game. He wasn't speaking the language. Someone shouted:

"Let's vote!"

Malvolio Leonte wanted to go on enjoying himself. He smiled at the man sweating on the stand in front of the microphones, and asked him in a harsh, arrogant tone:

"You wanted to be original, is that it?"

That was forbidden. One person was original, high up and far off in the East: that was the only personality—each of us had delegated our own to him. We had renounced; even Malvolio had renounced. It was a painful renunciation. And against the man who dares to be himself, different, unique, this pain explodes in hatred, in excommunication. There was hostile laughter in the hall.

"No, but I was seeking historical truth," Prospero said.

"Do you believe that there is another truth besides the truth established by the Party?"

A great silence in the hall.

"I believe there is only one historical truth."

"Which one?" Malvolio asked, furious and delighted to have an excuse to show it. Prospero Dobre ran his tongue over his lips and said in a faint voice:

"I believe there is only one historical truth."

Still silence. Malvolio addressed the hall:

"Any further questions?"

"No, let's vote, let's vote!" shouted some twenty men, the same ones who had asked questions and sent notes to the presidium. We were all covered with sweat. Behind their microphones, the leaders consulted together

in whispers. Finally they made up their minds. The President of the Academy of Sciences said:

"It is proposed, comrades, that Com . . . that Professor Dobre be expelled from the Party. To which I add, in my capacity as a rector of the University, that because of his *objectivism,* his lack of *Party spirit* in the question of historical truth, which he holds above the class struggle and the class society, he be dismissed from the chair of Universal History. Who is in favor of the expulsion?"

Everyone raised his hand. Arthur Zodie raised his hesitantly, his eyes on me. I was the only one, and the last. I raised my hand. Prospero didn't wait for the result of the vote. He stepped down from the stand, frowning, his jaw set and his lips pursed in a kind of muzzle. He sat down in his place again, without looking at anyone. The session continued. But he was no longer listening. He was alone, imprisoned in himself as though in an iron shell. At that moment, perhaps, the decision was germinating in him. But we didn't know. The session was continuing. We had to be convinced, we, the "average cadres," that we were nothing, that no one was indispensable. This is the way power is assured in certain societies, in certain states. The old Prussian ordered two grenadiers to hold his son Frederick at the window so he could see his favorite beheaded. Richelieu had the Duc de Montmorency decapitated to make it clear who was in power.

During the intermission, I saw Prospero speaking to Malvolio. He was below the dais, leaning on the red table with his hands up, the way a castaway in the sea clings to the gunwale of the lifeboat to which he is not

admitted. At the resumption of the discussion, the President of the Academy gave the floor to "Comrade Prospero Dobre." Comrade? The word meant that the expulsion was not yet ratified and definitive. Prospero ascended the tribunal. His face, usually stamped with intellectual pride, was dark, shapeless, dim, collapsed. He too? Even he? In a dead voice he read from a scrap of paper:

"Comrades, the Party's criticism of me is just. By *petit-bourgeois* intellectual pride, I have tried to put so-called scientific truth, which is abstract and idealist, detached from its class essence, above true scientific truth, impregnated with Party spirit, rich in revolutionary content—in a word, combative. I have ignored the revolutionary perspective, the only one which reveals the truth, opposing to it so-called documents and facts from the archives of the bourgeois regime. I realize the extent of my error, I find it just to be expelled, and I implore the Party to give me the chance to rehabilitate myself by assiduous, enthusiastic labor in the service of the spiritual and material prosperity of our Party."

He spoke the last words with a firmness that astonished me. After a moment of silence, the hall burst into applause. Malvolio was saying something in Alfred Anania's ear and laughing as he spoke. Arthur Zodie whispered to me:

"He's strong. I wouldn't have thought him capable of that, but it's no use: he'll end up being devoured."

I was watching Diocletian Sava, sitting between two empty places. His face was stony. He had loved Prospero, he had believed in him. What was he thinking now? Did he feel contempt for him? Pity? No, not pity, not Diocle-

tian. What then? Was he thinking that Prospero had done the right thing, that it was necessary to wait for a favorable opportunity, the day when the handle of the sickle would be in their hands? Prospero stepped down from the stand, his face gleaming with sweat, expressionless, not looking at anyone, and sat down again.

We came out very late, under the silk-and-diamond sky of a June night in Bucharest, caressing, warm, and voluptuous. I saw Prospero walk off quickly, alone. I stayed with Arthur Zodie. He was short and fat, like those Chinese lions sculptured by artists who had only heard of lions, so that they look like a cross between a Pekingese, a pig, and a toad. Maybe the dogs the Koreans force-feed to make one of their most highly appreciated gastronomic delicacies look like this. My friend Zodie had worked for the Party in the underground period, had been tortured without being made to speak, condemned to death, and then released at the last minute. At present he was the director of something, like all of us: he adapted himself to the new climate, he was growing his fur; but in secret, under the arctic mimesis, subsisted an agile and whimsical equatorial monkey, as will be seen in what follows.

"Poor Prospero," he said.

"Ugh," I said.

"Our good Malvolio has been waiting for him a long time at some turn in the road. He was Diocletian's man."

"What do you mean, Diocletian's man? He's a scholar. It's not Diocletian who's made him what he is."

"Yes, but it's Diocletian who got him decorated, it's Diocletian who wanted him to be admitted to the Academy at thirty-five. Which would have been perfectly

suitable, in fact. But," Arthur Zodie said, walking on his heels, his head high and his belly out, "have you read Balzac? No? You should, you really should. For instance, here's what he says in *Splendeur et Misère des Courtisanes:* 'The pleasure of insulting genius is proper to power; and the horse that Caligula made into a consul has had and will have countless new avatars.' Balzac's unfair: our poor leaders are permitted so few pleasures we mustn't begrudge them the few they have. Besides, we've just seen the opposite: it's the consul who has been made into a horse; yes, he's let himself be ridden like a woman."

Arthur turned around: no one was in hearing distance; people were getting into the rows of waiting cars. Arthur and I had sent back our chauffeurs at eight. Arthur continued:

"No one's listening. Tell me something, don't you get the impression that Malvolio enjoys a sexual pleasure when he possesses us that way? I'm sure he's impotent. . . . Have you seen their wives? And the leaders themselves: those hips, those behinds, all that fat. It's obvious: they're impotent. The only people they screw is us. Hee hee hee!"

He had a secret, smothered giggle. I preferred to say nothing, and pointed to two figures under the flowering lindens on the Boulevard Pake: a man and a woman. They had the same gait, almost the same height, he broad in the shoulders and narrow in the hips; she, her shoulders sloping, her waist easily encompassed by two hands, her hips heavy enough to delight a slave merchant of Erzeroum: they swayed at every step. We caught up with this couple and Zodie spoke to them:

"And where are these turtledoves off to?"

They stopped and turned around. It was the Fortunescos, Felix and Anita. Under the electric light that illuminated them gently through the linden leaves, he was dark, handsome, virile, too short, his feet too big; she was pale, her face a little too broad and flat, with the ambiguous smile and arched brows of a Central Asian *hanoum*. But both were elegant, Felix in a white shirt with an Italian tie and a dark-blue suit, Anita *décolletée* with a mole on one breast, wearing large earrings, a brooch between her breasts, and a black satin sheath that set off her beautiful round white arms. The Fortunescos were handsome, fresh, voluptuous, perfumed: like two carnations.

"Look at them," Arthur Zodie said. "We simmer in the Devil's brew, and they step out of a jewel case. You're disgusting. Hide yourselves at least! Don't you have a job for me in your department? I speak several foreign languages, including Yiddish."

"What's the matter with you two?" Anita asked. She had the musical, drawling voice and the fixed and satisfied smile of a woman who has just awakened after making love many times. "You look bad," she continued, "your faces are shiny, your eyes are bloodshot, and you haven't shaved. You shouldn't go to the movies in heat like this."

"We've been somewhere else: we were part of the show," Arthur Zodie said. Felix Fortunesco sniggered:

"Oh, the carrot. I can see the leaves."

It was a nasty joke that had made the rounds that year: we were supposed to absorb this metaphorical carrot by an orifice contrary to nature, so that the clump

of green leaves remained outside like an ostrich tail. The vegetable was the symbol of a dry run, a psychological rape. Arthur Zodie laughed derisively:

"You may feel like laughing, but what about your friend Alfred Anania, who received a vote of censure?"

He was lying. I didn't laugh, but I saw Felix's laughter fade. Only Anita remained unchanged, smiling too voluptuously.

"Poor Alfred," she said. "He was so powerful, too."

Arthur Zodie grinned, delighted:

"Not any more. But on the other hand, he's in perfect physical shape. Don't you think he's handsome? I do. He's so distinguished. Now you, Felix, you should have been a café dancer."

"I don't think so," Anita said, and she began to laugh, as always, like a woman enthralled by the assiduity of male homage. "He should have been a lord."

"Oh yes! The guests would have held out their hats and gloves and asked him if the lord was at home, hee hee hee!"

He was nasty, all right. But the Fortunescos didn't seem to notice it, and spoke of other things, smiling, urbane, frivolous. We left them at the next corner. Arthur Zodie, his hands behind his back, was giggling.

"Have you ever seen a woman who looked more like a cunt? Don't look at me like that, you fool; I don't mean her features, I mean her expression. She has a genital look, quite frankly, crudely erotic. What a whore she is, I tell you, what a whore!"

"Really? Anita?"

"For a hundred lei, I tell you."

"Impossible!"

"Let's say two hundred, just not to argue."

"You're lying; she probably rejected you and you lie about her like a swine. Arthur, don't be a cad."

He stopped. He had the unpleasant habit of forcing his interlocutor to stop too, in the middle of the sidewalk, and always too late; at least that was what always happened to me, and I was embarrassed and annoyed by it. He looked at me with fixed, glassy eyes—another nasty habit of his.

"Really?" he said aggressively. He opened his wallet and took out a snapshot which he handed to me. It was a photograph of Anita Fortunesco naked, on all fours, her face and her buttocks in three-quarters, her body young and perfect. Setting: a grassy bank, a stream, willows.

"So that's your opinion: Arthur's ridiculous, a drunkard, a buffoon, and women don't even look at him. That's what you think, isn't it? Isn't it?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't have any more doubts."

"I had this woman in her fur coat; it was an astrakhan, and with her skin white as it is the black fur was very becoming. Besides, she knows how to do everything she should. She was one of my employees. I had the most beautiful office help in Bucharest. One girl's husband is a commander in the Security troops. She was the one who gave me the most pleasure. Moral, you know, not physical."

"But all the same, Arthur, no offense, but listen: Felix is better-looking than you, or me either for that matter; he could be a movie actor . . ."

"Or a pimp!"

". . . all right, but I don't see what his wife is after from other men. Doesn't he satisfy her, or what?"

"Oh yes, completely! They have a great time together. They love each other. They have a real physical passion for each other," Arthur said. "It's to keep on good terms with the chief."

He was furious: Anita had wounded him after all, that's why he had been so nasty with them just now.

"She told me, once, when I had just slept with her, 'Poor Felix, I feel so sorry for him, his work wears him out. You're on such good terms with Diocletian Sava, you should say something to him about making Felix a ministerial councilor.' I wanted to laugh: first of all, she didn't know how great the distance was from me to the great Diocletian, and besides, she didn't know what he was like; it was crazy to suppose anyone could manipulate him that way. That's why I said to her, quite sweetly, 'For that, you'd better get yourself laid by Alfred Anania.' And she said, 'What a pig you are!' but she didn't get mad and we changed the subject. Two or three months later our friend Felix was a ministerial councilor. That's why when he began to make jokes about us I told him Alfred had fallen, although it was a lie."

"I see."

"You may also see why Felix hasn't been dismissed like most of his colleagues," Arthur Zodie said, gaily and harshly. "He's necessary to socialist construction. He's a devoted and enthusiastic worker for the foreign trade of our beloved country—a man of a new type: socialist man."

He stopped, then exploded:

"It's incredible! You realize that we're shaken like plums from a tree while the new cadres come up, formed by popular power. They're the insiders while we're the rotten ones, the suspects, the dubious items—but where's his place in all this? You know what I like about Felix? It's that he doesn't even speak in slogans, he talks like everyone else, he's humane, kind, helpful . . ."

"I don't like the way you express yourself," I said, embarrassed. "You have a counterrevolutionary tone."

"Or an *agent provocateur*'s! Hee hee hee! You're afraid of me. Hee hee hee! You're afraid, admit it! Come on, admit it, so I won't feel I'm the only one: you know, I'm afraid all the time! Hee hee hee!"

He was nervous; the scenes of the evening had shaken him up. To calm him, I said:

"Let's get back to the Fortunescos: You said they love each other. Does he know what she does?"

"Alfred Anania visits them. You know that men of his rank only see one another, they never visit the deputy directors or councilors like Felix, or you, or me. Still, Felix isn't surprised to see Alfred at their house, to find him there when he comes home; but I think he telephones first . . ."

"But . . . what about his physical feelings for Anita?"

"He still has them, but he's not jealous; besides, he takes it out on other girls. Don't forget, Anita's thirty and they've been together since she was twenty-two—she began making love when she was fifteen. But she's jealous. She's not understanding. She does what she does for the household budget, for his career, but Felix? Just for pleasure? Our little Anita doesn't allow that. She's always on the watch, like a cat in front of a mousehole.

She lies in wait for him. She's already caught him three times: at Tinel Zambilovici's, at Kiki Zandbanc's, and even in their own house. I was actually there. I mean, I was visiting a friend who lives in the same building, the apartment next door. We were talking quietly. Suddenly there was a noise out on the landing. My friend stuck out his head and saw Anita with the janitor; she had her gloves on, with her hat look—just a look, of course, she wouldn't dare wear a hat, it's not proletarian, but in any case it was obvious she had just come in, hat or no hat. The janitor was fussing with some tools to open the door of their apartment. Hearing Anita's voice, I came out too. And in that libidinous tone of hers, which doesn't always mean an invitation, you know, she said, 'Oh, Arthur, how glad I am to see you!' My friend tried to open the door for her too. 'It's locked from inside and the key's in the lock,' the janitor said. 'That's funny,' Anita said, 'I don't know where Felix is, no one answers; I rang, I telephoned. And there's a light on, I saw it from the street.' I said, 'Maybe you left it on, or maybe Felix did.' She smiled at me lasciviously: she was thinking of something else. The other two finally managed to get the door open. Anita gave the janitor a tip and invited us in for a drink. My friend didn't want to go, but I did. I realized what was happening, so I made him come with us. We walked in after Anita, who stopped at the bedroom door—they have a little living room and a bedroom, that's all—and said, 'Oh, Felix, you're here? Don't let me disturb you!' And she pushed both hands against the panels of the sliding door. Inside, Felix was sitting in a green satin armchair; in another chair, opposite him, a girl made up and dressed

like a little whore—which she was, moreover, a little TV announcer who slept with every man in her office. Between the armchairs was the bed, more or less covered with a cream satin spread. Felix was embarrassed but tried to pass it off. He kissed Anita's hand. She gave him a genital smile, but her eyes were cold. The girl stayed another two seconds, clumsily excused herself, and left. Anita let her get out. My friend and I kept quiet and laughed to ourselves. Felix was trying to be sophisticated: 'How are things?' 'We gave Anita a hand with the door,' I said. 'My God, how vulgar that creature is,' Anita said. 'Don't you think?' Felix: 'Won't you two have a glass of something?' Anita: 'You seem a little disturbed, Felix.' He gave her a black look, then snapped, 'Why should I be?' 'Just for having been caught with a whore in your wife's bedroom by your wife and your neighbors. It *is* rather embarrassing, isn't it?' Felix dashed through a door and made a lot of racket with some glasses and ice cubes. We stayed half an hour, just to enjoy the show. When Anita roasts Felix over a slow fire she's worth watching. No explosions, no tears, no screams; faint allusions, insults, really cutting remarks. With a kind of amused contempt, she said, 'What a pig that girl was! You do have some funny tastes, Felix! Your lower-class background always comes out when you get excited or scared.' Then, to us: 'Didn't you two think she was pretty common?' And suddenly pretending embarrassment to her neighbor: 'Oh, I'm sorry, I had completely forgotten you used to live with her, what a terrible *gaffe* I've made!' The neighbor started and began assuring her it was the first time he had ever seen the

young lady, which was true, but Felix nonetheless gave him an anxious, suspicious glance. When I couldn't keep from laughing any longer, I stood up and left. Since then, Felix has loathed his neighbor and avoided me. But he needs me; we'll make up.

"But Anita's just terrible: she terrifies Felix's mistresses, plays horrible tricks on them. I was at Valentine Ionesco's—Erasmus' sister, you know. They don't see each other; Erasmus is too much a Party militant, Valentine's too crazy and promiscuous: she compromises him. But she lives comfortably enough, gives parties—ever since the new freeze began, of course, no one goes any more, especially since our friend Valentine seems to have a little extra job: some supplementary hours for the Security Service. Well, it was at her place that I saw Anita meet one of Felix's young protégées. Valentine introduced them, probably on purpose, she's nasty enough for that. And then my Anita said to the girl, with that recently fecundated look of hers, 'Oh, I'm so happy to meet you, mademoiselle! Felix has told me so much about you—he just adores the mole under your right buttock; it's such a pity you're frigid, but you know, there are lots of women like you, there's really nothing you can do about it, you have to resign yourself or try someone else, although, my God, after so many dozens of experiments, the chances are really very . . .' And so on, smiling voluptuously into the poor girl's face. Even Valentine, crazy as she is, stood there with her mouth hanging open. What else could the poor girl do except turn and walk away, in the delighted silence of the guests, all of them under the dictatorship of the working class headed by

its vanguard, the Party—in other words, myself. I find her quite charming sometimes, my Anita," Arthur Zodie concluded thoughtfully.

II

We were walking along in silence. The shop windows were dark, or dimly lit, and full of wretched things. Papers and cigarette butts littered the sidewalk between globs of spit. A last streetcar went by with a great clang of iron gears. Then a late car. The city was exhausted, wretched, unsatisfied. And yet the whole night—the satin sky with its great jewels, the Crown, the Swan, the Lyre where Vega glittered, enormous, and the vegetable smells in the air, the hot asphalt, the hot walls, the music from an open window, the smell of the fried *mititei,* harsh and exciting—the whole night was soft and burning with a crude sensuality, like a gypsy girl's sex: June in Bucharest, in spite of everything; the memory of the febrility, the hysteria that reigned in the cauldron where we had simmered—even that memory was submerged by the simple and triumphant voluptuousness of the Bucharest night.

"Let's go to Capsa's for a beer," Arthur Zodie said.

We went into the famous little restaurant, quiet and elegant with its crystal chandeliers that hadn't been changed since 1890. It was empty. The bored waiters were leaning against the walls. There was only one customer, at a table at the other end: Prospero Dobre. Everyone who had been anyone in our country, the princes, the prostitutes, the poets, the scholars, the poli-

ticians, the businessmen, the actresses, the journalists, the artists, the madmen, the crooks, had drunk coffee or dined at Capsa's. The restaurant will soon be demolished. Prospero Dobre belonged here. He was sitting on the red plush banquette, his hands in his pockets, his chin on his chest, his eyes staring into space.

"We really shouldn't sit at his table," Arthur said. I don't know if it was fear or discretion that made him say that, for he immediately changed his mind:

"It can't be helped, anyway. Let's go over."

Prospero Dobre looked up as we approached. His face was tinged with bile, covered with unhealthy-looking blotches. Chateaubriand recounts in the *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* that he didn't recognize Napoleon after the killing of the Duc d'Enghien, and describes his pale complexion and drunken-looking eyes. I myself have seen that coloring in men who have died a violent death, and I saw it in my friend Prospero Dobre that evening. He looked at us with hostility.

"May we join you?" Arthur Zodie asked. Prospero shrugged.

"Why not?"

"They've offended you," Arthur said. "Comrade waiter, two beers. Cold!" And to Prospero: "Anyone around?"

"Oh yes, one or two shadows who got bored and left. But there are always the waiters."

"Yes, the darlings," Arthur Zodie said, looking affectionately at the idle waiters standing in the corners. Then he turned back to Prospero:

"They've offended you. They're fools. They'll regret

it. Already—you saw for yourself, during the second half of the meeting—already they let you read your self-criticism."

"They *let* me?" Prospero Dobre asked peevishly. "Oh yes, they let me, you idiot, but during the intermission Erasmus told me to write my self-criticism and to read it aloud; it was revised first by Malvolio."

And he laughed bitterly:

"Machiavelli says it's better to kill a man than to offend him. I seem to have been offended."

"Yes, Malvolio bears you a grudge, all right," Arthur Zodie said.

"I don't know what you mean. He's a man with principles. So am I."

He turned away. Arthur Zodie was offended. But how could Prospero know Arthur wasn't an emissary? How could Prospero know if the next day, when the discussion was to reopen, Arthur wouldn't stand up and say, "This is what Comrade Prospero Dobre told me last night"? We were all afraid of each other, and we had our reasons. Arthur was offended and tried to insult Prospero:

"I saw you talking to Malvolio. You were really crawling for it, weren't you?"

Prospero looked him in the eye and gave him a dreadful smile:

"No, not at all. I told him that the Party was my world and that I was ready to give my blood for the Party; I asked him to tell me what I could do to regain *the physiognomy of a Party member.*"

Arthur looked at him, stupefied:

"You told him that?"

"Why not? It's a formula consecrated by a resolution of the Central Committee."

Arthur was shocked. As a matter of fact, the expression had served to overthrow Diocletian Sava, publicly and officially. But it was so forced, so subrational that no man who had learned Rumanian from his mother would have used it without fearing sidelong glances and silences around him.

"That's what I meant," Arthur said. "You crawled."

A scholar and a man proud of thinking clearly and independently, like Prospero, had totally humiliated himself by using—without irony and to his mortal adversary—this magical formula. He had prostrated himself. But, strangely enough, Prospero didn't lower his eyes. I had already seen the effrontery of people whose back has been broken, or upon whom others have spat out their contempt: they look more unconcerned than before. But in Prospero's case, I was wrong. He had withdrawn behind the last rampart, the innermost one, that of the ultimate decision. But I didn't know that; I was fond of him and I suffered at having to despise him. He said to Arthur Zodie:

"Have you noticed that in our language, the word *honor*—not *honesty* but *honor*—doesn't exist? It's the same thing in Russian. Honor is a Western prejudice."

"You see?" Arthur Zodie said. "And for years you've been despising us, those of us who have bent our heads. Now you've let yourself be broken too."

Prospero laughed coldly and said:

"I haven't let myself be broken. You talk like a bourgeois. I've recovered my physiognomy as a member of the Party."

The fat little man looked at him anxiously.

"You sound pretty suspicious to me. What did you mean about Machiavelli?"

"It was a quotation," Prospero Dobre said, with an insolent laugh. I suddenly felt his old arrogance, his coldness. Wasn't he broken, then? How could it be? And yet he had acted like a broken man. I didn't understand until later.

"You sound suspicious to me," Arthur repeated. Prospero laughed gaily—for the first time.

"Just now, when I was on my good behavior? When I was crawling back into my shell?"

He burst out laughing. I didn't see the joke. Arthur Zodie looked exasperated when he said:

"It doesn't suit your character."

Prospero laughed more as he raised his glass.

"It doesn't have to suit mine, it has to suit other people's. Besides I don't have any character, I have a physiognomy! Here's to yours, both of you!"

We clinked glasses and drank; he had made us laugh, to our surprise, by the freedom of his own laughter: it really had something free and triumphant and lighthearted about it, that laugh of Prospero's. But how could we guess?

The door at the other end opened and the Fortunescos came in. They noticed us, smiled, came over, walking side by side, elegant, handsome, fresh. It was true, Anita did have a genital expression. They stood in front of us for a few minutes.

"It's so hot we just had to come in and drink something to cool off a little," Anita said. She let her arms hang, interlacing her three middle fingers together in

pairs, so that the thumbs pointed to her sex and the index fingers to my friend Prospero. At the same time, she stirred her hands slightly: the gesture was a strange one, sinister, obscene. Prospero looked at the point indicated by the thumbs, then raised his eyes to meet Anita's, smiled faintly, and almost imperceptibly shook his head. Arthur was chatting with Felix; they noticed nothing. The Fortunescos went to another table and sat down.

"How do they survive?" I asked.

"But I just told you. She sleeps with everyone. Even," Arthur said, "with this gentleman?" Prospero shook his head with a grave expression. Arthur said:

"You're a gentleman. But it's no use. She told me so herself."

"She's crazy. She's lying."

"Yes, I understand, you're high-minded. They have a *gouache* in their place, painted by Pius Dabija himself: the two of them *au naturel,* I mean naked, beautiful, and she has her hand on his scepter; magnificent thing—the *gouache,* I mean. The scepter too, as a matter of fact."

"They love each other," Prospero said, giving Felix an indulgent, smiling glance. "They're a pair of pigs, but very nice, and besides, they're made for each other; you must have noticed: alone they're not much, but together they're perfect."

The Fortunescos had guessed we were talking about them, and smiled across at us. They were like two carnations, the kind that have purple petals with pink edges, a harsh, brutal, hypnotic combination of colors.

"Oh yes, she loves him, all right," Arthur said.

"He loves her too," Prospero said. "When Anita was away, Felix was lost. He ran after women, but he lost weight, he was anxious, unrecognizable. Now he's calm again. They're both calm. It's good the two of them exist. Look how perfect they are."

He smiled at them again. Then he said to me:

"Did you know Felix and Anita both divorced to marry each other, like you and your wife?"

Arthur Zodie interrupted:

"You mentioned Anita's being away. Where was she?"

Prospero looked at him hard:

"Don't you know?"

"No, what was it?"

"She was in Switzerland."

"Switzerland? That's strange. They gave her permission? What was she doing there?"

"Didn't you know about her illness?"

"No! She was sick?"

Arthur was amazed. Prospero shrugged and said, "She has cancer. In Switzerland they removed one breast. But you know, you can never be sure, afterwards."

Arthur Zodie sank back in his chair. He had stopped laughing. He stopped talking. I remembered the photograph he kept in his wallet and the lovely, perfect breasts, the breasts of a statue. Yes, Felix loved her. They survived. Two carnations in a sheltered corner, sure of the nice rotten dung, twin flowers with their spicy aroma. The glaciers gained ground around them; they were very close now. I looked at them. They smiled back warmly—worldly, frivolous, beautiful, shameless, serene.

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CHAPTER 4

I

The next day, the Party conference continued. Fear, exasperation, the delights of cruelty, or of watching cruelty, had reached a point the following episode will illustrate. At around eleven in the morning, a man of about fifty came into the hall and walked down the central aisle, looking for an empty seat. His shoulders were slightly stooped and he was wearing glasses. Alfred Anania, who happened to be presiding at the time, shouted into his microphone:

"Hey! You down there! Who are you, comrade? Hey down there, you standing up!"

The man didn't realize the loudspeakers were addressing him. Around him, several hundred people had

turned to look. I saw some of them speak to the man, pointing to the long red table on the stage. He stared at it and lost his head. He was modestly dressed in a suit of rumpled linen, cheap sandals, and cotton socks.

"Who are you?" Alfred Anania asked. The man answered, and his weak, natural voice sounded absurd after the thundering question of the loudspeakers:

"I'm the director of the Institute of Electronic Physics, Professor . . ."

"And you arrive at this hour?" Alfred Anania roared fiercely. The tone of master to servant, the terrible rudeness, like the whole incident that followed, were not something peculiar to Alfred Anania (who was rather mild); it was important to emphasize the true relation of forces and crush the slightest impulse of insubordination.

"I was on vacation, my wife telephoned that I had been summoned, I took the train, it got in at ten-thirty, I took a taxi . . ." the man stammered; he had gone white hearing Alfred Anania's tone.

"Comrades!" roared the loudspeakers. "To teach the professor to respect the Party summons, we propose to expel him. Those in favor?"

The vote was unanimous. The professor had remained standing, aghast. The President of the Academy said:

"We shall take similar measures to protect young students from the influence of such indifference to the ideological struggle against the class enemy."

There was a pause. Alfred Anania said with an ironic smile:

"You may sit down. Comrade Isaias Proorocesco has the floor."

The professor sat down, his back bent, his gaze fixed. The new speaker mounted the dais. He was handsome, though his face was a little too soft. He was slightly wall-eyed, which gave him a sublime, unearthly look. He shook his head and two chestnut locks fell over his forehead: he was the image of the Revolutionary Tribune, and he knew it. He shouted in a warm baritone that produced a great silence in the hall and gave even me an involuntary thrill:

"Comrades! Comrades, our Party has gathered us together here to discuss questions of the struggle against the enemy ideology! Let us preserve the sacred purity of the Marxist-Leninist teaching! Let us bear high the banner of the most advanced, the most scientific conception of the world, the ideology of the working class! Let us not permit revisionism to profane the great ideas for whose victory we are struggling! Let us unceasingly increase our revolutionary vigilance! Even today, after fifteen years of the people's rule, there are those who give every evidence of a lack of vigilance that is *objectively* criminal and counterrevolutionary!"

This Kantian term, imported through Hegel and Marx into our Party language, meant that, subjectively, in his own conscience, a man could be what he wanted to be, but objectively, in the reality external to his conscience, he was criminal and must be treated as such. The hall was hypnotized. Alfred Anania, Malvolio Leonte (who had come in a few moments before), Erasmus Ionesco—all stared at the speaker in fascination.

"In our Ministry, for instance, Comrade Aidelberg received a delegation of comrades from our brothers in Venezuela. He took their addresses and sent them bro-

chures. And now the executioners of the Venezuelan secret police have their names and addresses!"

He pointed to the man in the audience:

"By lack of revolutionary vigilance, you have murdered eleven Communists!"

"Murderer!" shrieked a woman in the hall.

Aidelberg, short, blond, pale, stood up and shouted:

"But they gave me their names and addresses themselves! They were the ones who wrote and asked me to . . ."

Malvolio Leonte interrupted him:

"Is what was just said true or false?"

"But they're the ones who . . ."

"It is their business to be indiscreet; yours was not to give the bourgeois police their names and addresses. And you, Comrade Proorocesco, where were you? You are his colleague."

"I learned too late what had happened; the correspondence had already been mailed."

Malvolio's face darkened. He said:

"*We* propose the expulsion of Aidelberg, and we *recommend* that he be dismissed without notice. We have no need of our comrades' murderers among us. Those in favor?"

On the stand, the speaker voted as well, his hand raised like a statue on its pedestal, three yards above the audience. Aidelberg sat down again. Malvolio said:

"Continue, comrade."

"Comrades!" Isaias Proorocesco shouted. "Let us oppose every form of revisionism with all our strength! Revision of the Marxist-Leninist teaching is the most

perfidious and most pernicious form of infiltration of bourgeois ideology . . ."

A strange bestial lowing broke out in the hall, much more disturbing than the beautiful and impassioned voice of Isaias Proorocesco. Aidelberg had fallen between two rows of seats and was screaming. A cluster of men gathered around him, concealing him; finally he was carried out, stiff as a board, his eyes wide and glassy. Arthur Zodie, beside me, murmured:

"But he wasn't epileptic—it must be a kind of hysteria."

Malvolio hammered on the table with the end of his pen and said:

"Comrades, let us not create diversions. I propose we have no more scenes of hysteria and simulated sickness. I wish to be understood: I am not referring to what has just happened, I know nothing about it"—it was obvious from his tone that he was speaking of Aidelberg as well—"but we must combat any tendency to intimidate criticism! We are not a gathering of boarding-school pupils, and I advise no one here to behave like a schoolgirl!"

And he burst out laughing, jovial and good-humored. The hall laughed with him. He was so funny, when he wanted to be, that I felt my own mouth widen in a smile, but I caught myself and stopped.

"Continue, comrade," Malvolio said, pleased to have re-established the appropriate atmosphere.

"Comrades!" Isaias Proorocesco shouted. "We must defend to the death the sacred heritage of Marxist-Leninist teaching, and pitilessly unmask all revisionists!"

II

Listening to him, I remembered how I had first met him, in Diocletian Sava's office, when the latter was at the peak of his power. The chief was reading a report I had prepared, and annotating it. He rang and asked if there was anyone left in the antechamber. Yes, Comrade Proorocesco was there.

"What time was his appointment?"

"At noon, Comrade Diocletian."

"And it's two," Diocletian grumbled, annoyed. "Ask him to come in."

He was staring down the length of the office, which was like an amber cave: polished woodwork, midday sun through the curtains. The door opened and Isaias Proorocesco came in, handsome as Hermes, but neither bronze nor marble: a honey Hermes, and walleyed. Diocletian, to apologize for having made him wait so long, stood up and walked as far as the middle of the long red carpet enflamed by the sun:

"How are you? Forgive me, I had something to do I could not put off; but I've made up my mind to stop now, whatever happens. Tell me, what's the trouble? You know this comrade?"

He introduced us, then said to me:

"We'll continue afterward. Step in there and revise the text according to my notes."

And he opened the door behind his desk: there was a bedroom and bath for extraordinary circumstances. I sat down at a desk; the secretary on duty appeared: she was charming, with enormous green eyes: her name was Daniela Paciurea, and soon figures in my story. She told

me that the Comrade (to the secretaries and file clerks, the chief was the Comrade) wondered if I wished a cup of coffee or any refreshments. I agreed to coffee and she left the room, sending in a waitress who left the door partly open behind her. Suddenly, quite clearly, I heard the chief's voice, and Isaias'. I realized too late that I should have closed the door, but how could I have done so without a noise that would have made them realize I had been listening? I didn't move a muscle.

". . . but all the same, my friend, I don't understand. You were in love with each other when you married, weren't you?" the chief was saying.

"Yes, Comrade Diocletian, but we aren't in love any longer. I have to divorce her, and I beg you to help me."

"Listen, I can call the Minister of Justice: he can tell the judge what's necessary. All you have to do is tell me the number of the dossier and the court that's judging the trial. But if I'm to do such a thing, I have to be in agreement with you. Explain it to me. Convince me. That's all I ask. I can't act blindly, can I?"

"Comrade Diocletian, I must separate from my wife. She's hampering my ideological and political development. She is an apolitical being, without class instinct, without interest in social problems."

"Then educate her," Diocletian Sava's voice replied. "Let her develop beside you. Husband and wife must educate each other, help each other, reciprocally inspire each other. If your wife is not developing, you are probably at fault to some degree. Are you sure you've done everything to help her understand the meaning of our life, the goal a human being worthy of the name must

have? I'm asking you a question, not criticizing you. Analyze yourself, judge yourself—I don't know your relations with your wife."

"I've tried," Isaias said, "but it's no use, it doesn't work. I realize that I made a mistake in marrying her."

"Yes, but does she also realize that she made a mistake?"

"She won't admit anything. She wants to go on living with me, to have a household, to . . . you understand, she wants her *petit-bourgeois* happiness, something comfo——"

"I see," Diocletian Sava said. He didn't like the situation much, I could tell. He asked:

"You have children?"

"We have one son, but she insists on keeping him at home with her."

"But she'll never be able to raise him properly, if she's as you describe her," the chief said, his voice distinctly irritated now. "You don't want to bother with the child?"

"Yes, I shall find a way somehow," Isaias Proorocesco stammered quickly but vaguely.

"I don't like this business. I don't understand," Diocletian Sava said. "We must discuss it further. I wouldn't like to adopt a position merely on the basis of what you've told me. Perhaps you'll think it over some more. Perhaps you'll come here with your wife so that we may speak together, just the three of us?"

He was quite agreeable: hundreds of thousands of people depended on his decisions; he was guarded by police, by secret agents, by *pistolari;* his time was taken up by sessions of the innermost circle, by public meetings, by

work sessions, by audiences; and yet for the benefit of this little professor of Marxism-Leninism at the Workers' University he was offering to play the rabbi and conciliator between him and his wife. They had been in prison together. Isaias Proorocesco answered with an unctuous gratitude and left after a few more words. The door opened and Diocletian appeared.

"Well now, to work!" he said. He sat down behind his desk and began reading the text of the report, a red pencil in his hand.

III

The conference was adjourned for the midday intermission. The last speech had been Isaias Proorocesco's. I turned to my neighbor Arthur Zodie:

"When does it start again?"

"At four. We have an hour. Want to have lunch together?"

"No, I have to go home."

"To report to your lovely wife?" he asked with an ironic laugh. I didn't answer. Arthur was furious at having to eat alone; he struck at a sensitive spot:

"You know what surprises me? You've got through up to now. No one's attacked you. How does it happen? You belonged to Diocletian's team. Has Malvolio forgiven you for that? It would be the first time . . ." And he laughed gaily. "Come on, let's have lunch at Capsa's."

"No, I told you I can't," I repeated, and I left at once, pushing my way through the crowd flowing out like the audience leaving a movie theater, except that here every-

one knew everyone else and the show wasn't over. I caught sight of Erasmus, who waved to me to stop; he came over, took me by the arm, and pulled me into a corner to say:

"Wait a minute, my friend, don't just leave like that. Come out with me, we can talk a minute. You haven't signed to take the floor, have you?"

"I think it's unnecessary," I said; "there are dozens signed up as it is."

"No, you're wrong there. Some comrades have more authority than others. Their opinion is influential. Comrade Malvolio inquired personally whether you had signed up. He was very surprised to learn you hadn't."

At this point, we had reached the street, under the redolent flowering lindens. The cobbles were hot if you touched them, the asphalt soft. Just past its zenith, the tyrannical sun of the Danube plains, the sun that dissolves energy and will and breeds sensuality and exhaustion. The cars of the participants were driving off one after the other down this usually empty street. I thought quickly. Authority? I had a little, but it didn't count for much. Comrade Malvolio inquired personally? I sensed the danger. He wanted to make me talk. The word "surprised" was a threat; it meant an order that could be infringed only at one's own risk. Erasmus had approached me on orders and was transmitting an order.

"All right, I'll speak. Will you sign me up?"

"Of course. What subject will you speak on?"

"I haven't thought about it yet."

"I see. You know, *it would be good* if you at least touched on the case of Prospero Dobre."

I didn't answer directly. He had stuck in his dagger.

Attack the only one of my friends who had remained uncorrupted, whole, the only one I respected and even admired! I was quite flexible, well-disciplined, a devoted Communist; was it necessary to bring me to heel? They knew quite well that this friendship was the deepest point of my resistance, just as they had known that Prospero's was scientific truth. I was not a scientist, I was an administrator; but I was a loyal and active friend. I tried to wriggle out of it.

"You know, Erasmus, that business with the poor devil who had his epileptic fit down there was horrible . . ."

He didn't seem to have heard me, and continued:

"Prospero's formal and unsatisfactory self-criticism has made an extremely bad impression."

Malvolio had read the self-criticism, had approved it; now he had decided he wanted more. Erasmus continued:

"Too few comrades have touched on this question. You're a serious man who can be relied on, you should deal with it. That's my personal opinion, I want you to know," he concluded with an assumed stupidity (one must not reveal one's masters).

"Listen, my friend," I said abruptly, "do you think you'll get out of it yourself?"

"You're beating around the bush," he said. "You go on now, but before the session starts, pick me up at my office and we'll talk some more. Don't forget, now."

"I can't," I said. He smiled:

"All right, now that you've signed up to speak, no one will care if you come in a little late."

The ambiguity of his phrasing and the pharisaic insolence of his smile made me feel like strangling him. I

grumbled my good-by and left him. Malvolio was waiting for me, then, at this turn in the road. I was marked off for the slaughterhouse. And he was offering me the opportunity to save myself by attacking my best friend for no reason. But even if I did this, was I certain to escape? Malvolio took great pleasure in forcing a man to yield out of fear, and then crushing him afterward. "Let him dance first, and entertain us a little; we have time to kill him after"—that was his principle. I knew I wasn't going to attack Prospero. But at that very moment, wasn't I on the brink of a long slope that led downward to darkness, misery, misfortune? You can't believe such things. It's the same in a trench: you know that when you jump out for the assault you'll be killed, yet you don't really believe it, you hope against hope, against reason. I was able to escape Malvolio's attention, for he was too high up and too powerful to bother about me. But he was followed by his pack, or rather by his congeners, the new race which, under Stalin, had overrun everything, retreating during the thaw but returning to the charge before our eyes.

When I came home, my feelings probably showed in my face, for my wife asked me as I walked through the door:

"What's happened?"

And to give me a chance to catch my breath, she pointed to a young woman sitting in the library:

"I'd like to introduce you to Comrade Proorocesco; we belong to the same cell. The child has problems."

The visitor was a robust, coarse-looking woman; her eyes and nose were red from crying.

"What can I do for you?" I asked her.

My wife was looking at me hard. But she answered instead of our visitor:

"She's Isaias Proorocesco's wife. She's extremely unhappy, poor child. Her husband is involved with one of his students and wants to divorce her."

Comrade Proorocesco looked at me with a despairing and furious expression.

"I beg you," she said. "You have access to places I can't reach. Perhaps you could get me an audience with Comrade Malvolio Leonte? Or at least with Comrade Alfred Anania or Comrade Erasmus Ionescu?"

It was as bitter as it was absurd. But I answered seriously:

"I could, perhaps, but I'd have to explain what it was you wanted." And, to my wife: "I have to have a quick lunch and pick up Erasmus at his office on the way back to the meeting."

She gave me a quick, anxious look and left the room. I sat down to listen to Proorocesco's wife. The poor woman, her face swollen with tears, told me:

"I'm his third wife. I used to be his secretary."

"Then he managed to divorce a second time?"

"Yes, Comrade Malvolio Leonte gave him his support. That's why I want to explain to him that Isaias isn't worthy of him. I loved that man, comrade, and I still love him, even though he's a . . . he's not worthy of being loved. He abandons each wife in turn, children and all, and kicks us out the door, you understand, out into the street; he keeps his apartment. And his reason for throwing us out with the garbage is that we hamper his ideological development! Oh he's such a pig, it's not fair!"

Her lips were trembling and finally she burst into sobs. But they passed quickly and she continued:

"I can't start all over now. I'm thirty-five. I have a child. I want to have a household, a husband, I mean a father for my child. When I think that I'm going to have to look for a room or a job, I feel I could die. Who will give me one? Where could I find it? It's not that I have any *petit-bourgeois* ideological problems, but to be the wife of a professor of Marxism, eating well and cheaply at University House, and going to a summer resort on the seashore is quite different from being a secretary or a file clerk who has to smile at the personnel director or sleep with him if he wants you to! And Isaias is crazy: he doesn't even talk to me any more, or else he barks at me, he only comes home in the middle of the night, he's always at his meetings . . . I know what kind of meetings they are!"

"Right now he happens to be telling you the truth, you know."

"Since yesterday!" she said scornfully. "But he's been at these meetings for months! And he calls himself a Communist. And from the underground days, even! He does nothing but harm—to the Party, to me, to himself, to everyone. What will the people who aren't Party members say? Comrade Malvolio should be told, he's a man of principle, he won't tolerate such things!"

My wife had returned and sat down without saying a word.

"I understand," I said to Comrade Proorocesco. "In half an hour, I'll be seeing Erasmus Ionesco, and I'll tell him. Telephone me tomorrow at noon and I'll tell you what I've been able to do."

She thanked me over and over before she left. My wife saw her to the door and returned, saying:

"She's a good girl. When those pigs in the Cell Bureau tried to play one of their tricks on me, she stood up to defend me without even knowing me, just because she realized that they wanted to have the cell vote on a piece of filth. Apparently her husband's quite a man. But tell me now, what happened to you?"

I began eating with a nervous appetite, and told her what had happened. As I spoke, she grew more serious and her mouth pursed up; it's becoming, that little mouth of hers with its heavy lips.

"Don't go," she said. "Tell them you're sick! Drink until you're sick! I'll give you a cathartic. But don't go!"

I burst out laughing and kissed her.

"Whether I'm there or not, our good Malvolio will guess in any case. Falling sick after what Erasmus told me—do you suppose that's a good idea?"

We looked at each other in silence. It was very hot, despite the half-lowered blinds. The furniture cracked in the dreadful afternoon heat of a Bucharest summer. A thick layer of dust that the burning wind had raised on the Baragan fell over everything. I stood up and said:

"I'll manage."

"Be careful," she said. "Be dull, and avoid Malvolio's questions. He's too strong, he's armed and you're defenseless. I'll stay here and wait for you. If there's an intermission, telephone me. But be careful what you say. Good luck."

She kissed me, holding me tight in her arms, and led me to the door and out onto the landing. She stood there, watching me go down the stairs.

IV

Erasmus was in his office and seemed quite unaffected by the hours spent in the stale air of the hall. He received me cordially, his hand outstretched:

"Take a chair. A cup of coffee? Lemonade? A cigarette?"

I accepted nothing. I said:

"Proorocesco's wife came to see me and asked me to get her an audience with your chief."

And I told him all I had heard. He listened with a faint smile.

"This comrade's ideological development is going a little too far, in my opinion," I concluded. Erasmus laughed quickly.

"Fine, I'll see. What wouldn't I do for you? Have you given some thought to what you'll say later?"

"Yes, but you know, in these scientific questions, I . . ."

"Not at all, it's a question that concerns every Communist. What is truth? What you think it is, or what the Party says it is?"

I didn't look at him. It was difficult for me to do so. I said:

"Yes, I know. I'll find a way of discussing this question."

"I know you will. I'm sure of it. You're a good man."

A friend who has recently been put in jail told me he had stood everything bravely enough until a guard clapped him on the shoulder and said, "You're a good man, you're not like these pigs." And that had made him burst into tears of humiliation. I went away with

the same feeling, for Erasmus declared he still had work to do. In the outer office I passed Isaias Proorocesco.

I don't remember anything that happened until the moment I took the floor. I can still see myself on the stand. In front of me was the hall, the gray crowd with their pink faces. To my left, the presidium; the man farthest away was Erasmus, his prematurely bald head shiny and yellow. I spoke vaguely, piling up slogans:

"Ideological vigilance, comrades . . . The class enemy is waiting for our moments of inadvertence, in order to take advantage of them and infiltrate into our ideological front, that front which is everywhere—in the factories, the collective farms, the administrations—for it is the collective conscience itself which . . ."

"Comrade," Malvolio Leonte's voice thundered over the loudspeaker, "would you care to be more specific? The assembly has the impression you are evading the issue. Give us examples, comrade, and stop beating around the bush!"

A faint murmur ran through the hall: there was laughter. Malvolio had guessed my tactics, for he was very intelligent, and his mind was used only for such things. One must give examples: in other words attack those present, even those absent. I continued talking without obeying. The audience murmured, bored. I didn't want to interest them. I concluded quite flatly and stepped down the first step of the stand.

"Don't be in such a hurry," the loudspeaker drawled. The audience burst out laughing. "There are questions Comrade Alfred Anania has questions to ask, appar-

ently. Who else? Ah! Comrade Proorocesco. Go ahead."

Alfred Anania turned toward the hall and asked:

"What does the comrade think of the position taken during yesterday's discussion by his personal friend Prospero Dobre?"

Silence. A shudder of revolt ran through me but I managed to restrain myself from committing public suicide.

"I think it is a scientific matter, and since I'm no scholar, I have no opinion."

"You're a Marxist, aren't you?" Malvolio Leonte asked jubilantly. The hall laughed again. I answered:

"I do my best."

"Oh, and is this your best? The question involved is one of the foundations of Marxist-Leninist thought. One need not be a scholar to have an opinion on it. It is enough to be a Communist. Another question, Comrade Anania?"

"No, to me his answer is clear," Alfred Anania replied in an insulting tone. "It's clear to all of us."

More laughter, though fainter this time. It was Isaias Proorocesco's turn to ask me questions. He stood up in the hall and shouted with a voice almost as loud as that of the loudspeakers, the true voice of a tribune of the masses:

"Will the comrade answer these three questions. First: does he think his speech has been a valuable contribution to the discussion? Second: have Marxism-Leninism and administrative technique nothing in common? Lastly: is protecting one's friends compatible with the ethic of a Party member? That is all."

I was amazed at the hatred in his voice. What had

appened to him? But there was no time to think about iat. I had to answer. I said firmly:

"As for my contribution to the discussion, it is for the)mrades to evaluate that, not me. Marxism-Leninism)ncerns all human activity. To protect our friends is in-)mpatible with our ethic, as are spiteful insinuations in ie form of questions."

There was some applause, but Malvolio, his face rim, his voice furious, exclaimed:

"Please, no interruptions!"

He himself had interrupted and tolerated dozens of iterruptions whenever his prey was concerned. I real-ed that I was lost. Not immediately: I was marked for more remote date. At the same time, I had hope. erhaps I could make my luck turn. And I was furious ith Malvolio, I hated him. So he silenced the applause iat might save me? Wait: I would make him applaud hether he wanted to or not.

"Comrades!" I exclaimed. "I do not pretend to know iore than any of the rest of you. I have nothing to :ach anyone. On the contrary, I have a great deal to :arn. But I am ready to give the last drop of blood)r our beloved Party, and I am convinced, profoundly)nvinced, of the justice of the path that Party is now iking in the glorious footsteps of the Fatherland of)cialism, the Soviet Union, builder of Communism! ong live our Party, led by its Central Committee, and : its head, Comrade . . ."

Energetic and rhythmic applause exploded. I too ap-lauded, in the Russian manner, with a serious and usinesslike expression. I glanced at the presidium out f the corner of my eye. They too were applauding,

but their faces were stony. I stepped off the stand and sat down in my place beside Arthur Zodie. He murmured:

"Bravo. You got off. But another victory like that one . . ."

I wiped my face and neck. I asked him:

"Where's Prospero?"

"Left during intermission," Arthur breathed, his glasses and teeth glittering. "No use! Stupid, what you did!" he added.

I had offended him by not yielding. During the next pause, Malvolio, passing with Alfred Anania and other satellites, said to me:

"My congratulations! Bravo!"

And he walked away, laughing. I was stunned. Seeing Erasmus I went over to him to try to find out what was happening. He asked me in a frivolous tone of voice:

"How are things?"

"You heard me speak?"

"Yes," he said, smiling coolly.

"You didn't like it? I forgot, the questions made me lose the thread of my ideas, you know."

"No need to apologize, my friend; the discussions are open, everyone has the right to say what he thinks, and to discuss what he prefers."

He was glancing around the hall as he spoke, as though he were looking for someone. I asked:

"By the way, did you manage to make an appointment for Proorocesco's wife?"

He looked at me strangely, then said:

"No, everyone's too busy. Maybe after vacation, in September. Besides, if it's about the divorce, I've heard

he'll get it tomorrow. . . . I mean the court will decide tomorrow, of course. I don't know in whose favor. Will you excuse me? I've got to talk to someone."

And he left me. I suppose it's superfluous to add that Isaias got rid of his third wife and her child and married for the fourth time, thus pursuing his ideological development.

✳✳✳✳

CHAPTER

5

I

During those days, the Paciureas' story reached its climax. When I learned about it, *consummatum erat.*

We had met them at a party given by the President of the Council, in the Hall of Marble with hammers and sickles surrounded by bronze sheaves embossed on the doors. Everyone was wearing dark suits and pearl-gray ties. The women wore no jewels on their severe dresses. The women who were ministers or presidents of National Committees were in black suits or dresses and wore no make-up. The patriarch of our Church was wearing a white headdress whose veils floated to the ground; he was magnificent in a long gray beard and an ivory cross set with semiprecious stones. The Chief

Rabbi was there as well, in a violet robe with a small cap of the same color, and several generals in khaki with broad gilded epaulets. Everything was sober but ceremonial. Everyone was short, heavy, pale: people whose lives were spent in offices, under fluorescent lights. Our chiefs were standing at the top of the stairs and receiving the guests. The guest of honor arrived last. In the Hall of Marble, we heard only a murmur, saw heads turning toward the door, and a great cloak floating. Then the guest appeared, between the first and second figures of State. He was taller and much thinner than they. No black suit for him: a khaki robe and over it a black silk cape with gold braid. Around his waist was tied a black silk shawl with a long pointed gold dagger stuck in it, curved like the new moon. This potentate was rather young, pale, olive-skinned, and handsome; he had velvety eyes with long lashes curved like his dagger and a lovely grave mouth. His head was wrapped in a fringed turban.

A path was made, and he passed between the two rows of guests. The Imam (for he was an Imam) looked at the women as he passed, not rudely but attentively. He looked at my wife, then at someone to my right. He went by. After him came two men older than their prince, also in black capes with gold braid and armed with curved daggers. They passed, hidden in their beards. Then came a man in a tuxedo with very dark skin, smooth shiny hair, heavy black-framed glasses; with him, a slender officer less than five feet high in a uniform of English cut, but with a black silk cap cocked over one ear; this little soldier was dark, with very white eyes, and very erect, carrying his head high and

holding his hand over his Yemenite dagger. I realized that they were looking at my wife, whose heels made her almost six feet tall, and who was wearing a dress of white brocade. But who could be to my right? I turned my head and saw a handsome man of about forty-five, with gray temples and blue eyes sparkling under their long lashes, sly and seductive. Beside him, rising from a white gauzy blouse, olive-skinned with huge green eyes and long silky lashes, a little purple mouth, a helmet of black hair pasted to her cheeks, slender, secret, Spanish, looking at no one, alone with herself—who would have recognized her? The former secretary of Diocletian Sava, the one who had asked me if I wanted coffee or refreshments. Then she had been a pretty girl. Now, she looked like one of those night-blooming flowers that scent the summer air with cinnamon.

A few minutes later, I asked Erasmus Ionesco who my neighbor was.

"That's Dionis Paciurea, director in our ministry." (At the time, Erasmus was the director-general in a ministry, until he came back into the Party apparatus.)

"I know his wife," I said. "She used to be Diocletian's secretary. But how she's changed. I think she's much more beautiful than she used to be."

Erasmus laughed enviously and puckered up his lips.

"Marriage becomes her. Each of them divorced so they could be together, her first husband didn't want to, it was quite a story. Now they're happy; except for you and your wife and the Fortunescos, they're the handsomest couple here."

I stared at them, fascinated. They were quite different from us and from the Fortunescos. We looked alike,

but the Paciureas weren't matched, or similar; they were together. I've described the Fortunescos—shady, charming, voluptuously contemptible. My wife and I had a discreetly adventurous and eccentric manner—at least, if what we were to do could already be read on our faces. The Paciureas had a refined expression, humane and fragile, without anything disturbed or enigmatic about it. Seeing Daniela Paciurea, you didn't think of erotic things. He wasn't that kind of man either. They were two beings who loved each other, serene, peaceful, and obviously happy. That explained why her expression was so reserved and secret: she had withdrawn into herself, she needed nothing, no one. They didn't even look at each other. They merely stood side by side.

After that evening, when we met them and left together, we made friends with the Paciureas. We saw each other too seldom, particularly during that last year. And on those days when we assembled ostensibly to discuss the question of revisionism, but actually to confirm our absolute submission, Dionis Paciurea happened to be in the hall, but I didn't notice him among so many people. The third day, exhausted and envenomed by our own nervous tension, we saw him on the stand. He was perfectly immaculate, clean-shaven, and looked rested and normal while the rest of us were yellow, perspiring, and swollen with overexcitement and latent fear. He spoke calmly, deliberately, and was about to step off the dais when Isaias Proorocesco stood up in the hall and asked him a question that made me (that made us all) understand that something was happening to Dionis.

"How does the comrade explain his nomination to

the post of director at the head of a group in which many comrades older and better prepared than he were working?"

A silence followed. Then Dionis Paciurea, his eyes smiling (the kind of smile that made women wild about him), answered:

"But . . . I am no longer . . . director, so that the question need no longer be asked."

To everyone's surprise, Alfred Anania, on the presidium, spoke into his microphone:

"Don't make jokes, comrade. Answer the question."

I looked at Dionis. I realized that during the several months since we had seen him last his hair had turned completely gray. In the hall, Isaias Proorocesco shouted:

"If it is difficult for him to answer my question, I shall formulate it differently. Does he not feel that he achieved his nomination rather because of his servility than because of his merits? He was spoken of as the ass-kisser of the Ministry."

And he sat down again. Dionis had no time to open his mouth to answer. Diocletian Sava stood up and spoke:

"At the time, I was the Minister. I appointed Dionis Paciurea because I respected him and considered him extremely capable. And the manner in which the question has been put is an insinuation unworthy of a Communist."

And he sat down again as Malvolio Leonte said with a disagreeable smile:

"You don't have the floor, comrade, don't interrupt."

Dionis stepped down off the stand. There were no more questions. What had happened to him that could

make his hair turn white? I learned it directly from him, later on—too late.

II

This is how it had begun. Diocletian had fallen several months before. But Alfred Anania was still Deputy Minister and secretary-general. He had dismissed one of his secretaries and had taken on another, Daniela Paciurea, who had worked for Diocletian. Daniela had worked in his outer office for about two weeks. One day Alfred Anania worked until eight in the evening. They were alone in that whole wing of the Ministry. Those are the hours when the chiefs make conversation, or reflect on tactics in the secret battles they're engaged in, or do what Alfred Anania did. He came out of his office and rested both arms on his secretary's desk, leaning over Daniela.

"Make a note," he said. "Tomorrow at eight, session of the Ministerial College: the directors-general, the Party Committee, the trade union. At noon I want to see Erasmus Ionesco. At one, the Comrade Minister is receiving me. At two, Felix Fortunesco is coming to talk to me."

His tiny mustache wriggled under his nose as he talked. Daniela wrote the last word, raised her eyes, and met his. Since she was short, she was accustomed to raise her eyes toward anyone she was speaking to; her eyes had an involuntary expression of adoration in them that

had appeared since her marriage to Dionis. Alfred Anania received the shock of those eyes and said:

"You're really a charming little girl. Let Papa give you a kiss."

And he leaned still farther forward to kiss those pale cheeks or that tiny purple mouth. But Daniela drew her head back and Alfred Anania remained thrust forward, his protruding lips surmounted by the tiny mustache. He had lost his head and could no longer stop himself. He walked around the desk, arms wide, and cornered Daniela between the table and a stand covered with four telephones.

"Come on, now, don't be frightened, I'm not going to hurt you. What's the difference if I give you a kiss . . ."

And she made a last step backward, overturning the stand and the four telephones, which crashed noisily to the floor. Daniela jumped over them and looked around her, trying to find the closest door. But Alfred Anania had checked himself. He said coldly:

"You don't understand a joke. Look what you've done. Come on, now, put it all back; I'll help you."

Which he did, in silence. Then:

"Sit down and take this down. Tomorrow afternoon at five, the Bureau of the Party Committee. At eight, film showing."

These were private showings, for high officials; at them, Western films were shown.

"There, that's all. You're tired out. You can go home now."

He had spoken with the impersonal kindliness of a chief to one of his subordinates. The absolute, impass-

able distance had been re-established. Nothing had happened. He went back to his office.

From what Dionis, Erasmus, and others told me, I reconstructed the whole story. The next day, Alfred Anania received a visit from Erasmus Ionesco to discuss departmental questions. Suddenly he said:

"Listen, I've been meaning to ask you for a long time: you know Dionis Paciurea well; can you answer for him —*politically?*"

Erasmus glanced at him sharply, then he smiled:

"I'll have to think about that. Why?"

"Someone's reported that he sees a lot of hardened reactionaries, Iron Guardists and so forth. In secret, apparently, at his home. Of course I'd like to check this information. Something's certainly happening to the man. Haven't you noticed it lately?"

"Maybe. Yes, maybe I have, actually," Erasmus said, frowning as if he were thinking hard. He had understood. His mind was always quick, and his reflexes even quicker, which accounts for the career he has enjoyed. Alfred Anania was quite pleased with Erasmus' reaction. They returned to departmental questions. Erasmus asked for a Volga or a new Opel to replace the old Lincoln his office used, and Alfred promised him there would be no difficulty about obtaining one.

Then Alfred Anania went to his minister, Basil Morcovici, Diocletian Sava's successor in the government (within the Party, it was Malvolio Leonte who had replaced the fallen lion).

"Comrade Basil," he said, with a mixture of respect and familiarity, "now that we've covered the important

questions, I'd like to speak to you of a trifle, and I apologize for doing so, it's really an absurd matter, but only your authority could resolve the question without ambiguity. It's about Paciurea and his wife. We see them walking every day in the little interior courtyard, hand in hand or arms around each others' waists, and you know, they're young, they're in love, there's nothing wrong with that, they're an attractive couple, they're young, but all the windows of the offices overlook the inner courtyard, and . . . I don't know, but . . . what do you think?"

Basil Morcovici was squat, heavy, and dark. He looked like a boar. He asked harshly:

"Oh yes? An attractive couple, you say?"

"The handsomest I've ever seen," Alfred Anania said, looking at him closely. The Minister had an ugly wife whom he no longer loved, and who was growing old. A coarse and brutal virility tormented him, and Alfred Anania knew it.

"It's their business," the Minister grumbled, "but . . . Well, we'll see."

This happened the day after the Alfred Anania–Daniela incident. The day of the incident itself Daniela had returned to the house, finding only her mother there, who had come to sit with the children and who left shortly afterward. Daniela stayed with the children: the big boy, whom she had had by Dionis when she was still living with her first husband; the daughter, and the younger son still in his crib. She telephoned to the Ministry, but Dionis' secretary told her:

"I can't go in, they're in a cell meeting."

So Daniela waited until eleven that night. The chil-

dren were asleep in their room. She waited in the other room, which was both the dining room and the bedroom. At last Dionis came home.

"I've been waiting hours," Daniela said. He smiled wearily and took off his jacket, his tie, then his shirt. He said:

"You're funny, darling. As if you weren't working in the same madhouse!"

"But I needed you!" she exclaimed. And seeing his suddenly attentive and surprised expression, she told him what had happened. He looked at her hard, questioned her sharply:

"You didn't do anything foolish? You didn't give him any reason to imagine . . . don't look at me like that! I don't doubt you! You could have without even meaning to!"

She was staring at him, her eyes enormous in her tiny face. He knelt before her, took her face in his hands, and kissed her many times on the eyelids, on the cheeks, on the mouth.

"What will we do, now?" she whispered. He sat down beside her on the divan.

"You'll have to ask for a transfer," he said. "Tomorrow."

"Don't you realize he's going to persecute me? I'll have to leave the Ministry."

Dionis, his eyes staring into space, kept opening his hands and clenching his fists. He swore under his breath, and then, with hatred in his voice:

"And I can't do a thing to him! But who knows . . ."

"Be quiet, I can't bear to see you like this . . . it's like that time at Sinaia . . ." she murmured, with a tiny

pained grimace. At Sinaia, in the mountains, the three of them had met—Daniela, her first husband, and Dionis—to decide on a permanent separation. They were all vacationing in various nearby resorts and had made a rendezvous in the woods. But the husband had leaped on Dionis and tried to choke him to death. Dionis, his face looking as it did now when he was cursing Alfred Anania, had broken the other man's nose with his fist. Daniela had watched them roll on the ground, panting and trying to strangle each other, and then had run off screaming for help. She didn't know what they were saying to each other through clenched teeth. The first husband was snarling: "No, I'm not divorcing her! She'll stay with me! I'll fuck her whenever I feel like it! And you—I'll kill you!" And Dionis: "I'll kill you first, you pig!" At the last minute, when people were coming, the first husband had hissed, "Tomorrow, here, and bring a pistol. At seven in the morning!" The next day, Daniela followed them, having alerted the police, and both men were arrested.

"I don't know how I can go on talking to Alfred Anania," Dionis murmured, his mouth dry. Daniela pressed against him and put her arms around his waist.

"It doesn't matter. You only deal with Erasmus. You have no occasion to come into conflict with him. It would have been better not to tell you at all. But I couldn't help it. You have to know everything about me. Otherwise I couldn't love you completely, completely . . ."

He took her in his arms and kissed her, his head on fire. They clung to each other on the worn divan as if they had been naked; they panted feverishly. Dionis

turned out the light with his free hand, then he caressed her warm thighs under her skirt, her belly, and began to tear off her underwear. It was late, it was dark, the children had fallen asleep long before; only the two of them were stirring in the darkness, moaning like pigeons, fully dressed save for their burning bellies and their thighs. Afterwards they took off their clothes and made love again; they fell asleep then, pressed against one another, whispering, "You remember? The first time? I didn't even know you came into me . . ."

"I love you, my love, my life, I'd like to be alone with you, but not here, on a desert island, on another planet, and make love to you for years, for centuries, without separating, without breathing . . ." They fell asleep.

The next morning, Daniela asked her chief to grant her a brief leave of absence: she wasn't feeling well.

"Not feeling well? Of course, go on home and take care of yourself," said Alfred Anania with his official *bonhomie,* as one kisses the children bringing flowers to the speaker's stand on the first of May. After two weeks absence, Daniela returned and received a post in the service under Erasmus Ionesco's direction. But during the first session of the Ministerial College, Basil Morcovici, broad, heavy, frowning, his elbows on the table, in reviewing the discussion with a sidelong smile on his boar's snout (oddly enough, he wore pale-gray clothes of excellent materials which contrasted strangely with his hunting-trophy face), said:

"And now, a detail concerning the life of our workers' *collective.* I've seen Comrade Paciurea with his *companion* in the inner courtyard of our building. Of course

they're young, they love one another, which is well and good, very suitable, in fact, but I believe that a more serious, a more sober attitude would be advisable; let us not forget, comrades, we have a workers' personnel here, and our workers are very modest about expressing their intimate feelings."

The sidelong smile grew increasingly bitter, and at the end decidedly hostile. Some twenty chiefs of departments turned their heads to look at Dionis Paciurea. Alfred Anania smiled at the latter—the same smile as the Minister's: lascivious, cold, and full of hatred. Dionis exploded:

"Comrade Minister! I see no connection with the object of our session, which is to discuss questions of public interest! I do nothing immoral, and it is to be hoped that everyone has such relations with his *companion.*"

A silence followed. Everyone knew about the crisis in Basil Morcovici's household. The Minister said:

"Now, let us move on to another point: the expenditure and employment of internal resources."

At the end of the session, Dionis' colleagues did not speak to him while the Minister and Alfred Anania were present. And even afterward, they confined themselves to exchanging a few insignificant words and left him standing where he was.

Next came the incident of Woman's Day, March 8. The entire Ministry personnel gathered in the great hall that was decorated with slogans: *Glory to the Party which has given women equal rights! More women in production! More women in posts of high responsibility!* Little pieces of brass indicated the list number of these decorative panels in the inventory of the furnishings:

enthusiasm was scrupulously catalogued. The secretary of the Party Committee, the chief of the Women's League, and Comrade Alfred Anania, representing the Ministry, deliberated concerning the persons to be invited to the presidium.

"Let's make Daniela Paciurea the representative of the salaried workers; we had her on the presidium last year, too," suggested the chief of the Women's League. Anania said nothing. The secretary of the Party Committee said expressionlessly:

"This year, we should change it a little."

The good woman glanced at the two men and understood. She proposed someone else, who was accepted without a murmur.

Afterward came the elections for the bureau of the Party Committee. Dionis Paciurea was proposed and elected. Two days later, the assembly was convened again, and a comrade sent by the district committee announced that the list could not *yet* be confirmed. The secretary proposed an identical list, except that Dionis Paciurea was not on it. The list was voted unanimously.

III

Some time later, Dionis Paciurea was called into the office of Basil Morcovici, so immaculate, elegant, pomaded (he had recently been a member of a delegation to the West), though the same old boar showed through it all. He began amiably enough:

"Sit down. A cup of coffee? No? As you wish. How's

your work going? And your family? Fine, just fine. Listen, Comrade Paciurea. The Ministry needs you. We need people capable of reinforcing certain sectors. We thought of you, among others. Your department is doing well. We must reinforce another point. You will work in another department."

Dionis said:

"May I ask why you say 'in' another department?"

"Now I hope you're not out after honors, are you? You insist on being a chief? You, a Communist? You will be a deputy director."

Dionis, suddenly suspicious, said:

"I'd just like to know what department you mean."

"Are there some you'd rather not work in?" the Minister asked, drawing a zigzag on his pad.

"I'd prefer not to work with Comrade Anania."

"No? Why not? Have you ever worked with him? Don't you get on well together?"

"I don't think I can work with him."

"No? He's a good comrade, an intelligent, understanding man, and . . ."

Dionis looked at Basil Morcovici with a sparkle in his eyes and the false naïveté that was so beguiling. The Minister laughed:

"Then you really don't want to? All right. Tomorrow you talk to Erasmus Ionesco. He'll tell you where you've been transferred."

And he negligently held out his hand, without looking at Dionis Paciurea. The next day Dionis visited his chief, Erasmus Ionesco, who kept him waiting in an outer office full of noisy typewriters. Finally the secretary, a poor

piano-legged monster who had nothing feminine left about her, said to him with a clumsy familiarity:

"You can go in, comrade."

Erasmus received him with the same kind of cordiality as the Minister's.

"Well, let's see, now. Yes. You'll be working with our good Alfred Anania."

"Are you sure of what you're saying?"

"You're joking, my friend," Erasmus said. "I have the decision here, signed by Basil Morcovici. How's your health? And Daniela? She's well?" They spoke of other matters until Dionis left. When he told everything to his wife, she said:

"After all, what can he do to you? Little nastinesses, that's all. He can't decide your fate, can he?"

She didn't believe what she was saying. Nor did he. But he answered:

"Yes, of course, you're right. We'll see. After all, he can't do me any real harm."

And so Dionis presented himself to his new chief, who received him with a sarcastic smile.

"Come in, come in, I was waiting for you. Take a seat!"

Without shaking hands, he continued:

"You know, there will be a great deal of work, and hard work; you'll have to earn the salary our working class pays you. Did you know you make four times more than a worker? All right, comrade, I want you to put your shoulder to the wheel. Your *personal salary*" (a secret payment granted by the Ministry) "has been eliminated. We're cutting down in our department, we

don't waste the people's money around here. When I'm convinced of your zeal, I'll reconsider the matter. Good morning, comrade."

Dionis left, determined to resist. And he resisted. But in a few months his hair had turned white. And he was less passionate about his love-making. He loved his wife as much as before; Daniela was still the only woman in the world for him. But he no longer felt like making love. She clung to his body at night, tiny and tense, and said nothing; she waited. Daytimes, too, they tried to be together as much as possible. They knew that there was only one thing to do: resist, survive.

IV

Then Dionis' new chief called him in to say:

"You know, I personally regret having to lose you, but *the comrades* need you in the Documentation Department: they need a capable comrade there."

And Dionis was transferred to this new department, where no one knew exactly what job to give him. His colleagues were afraid of being dismissed to make room for him, and treated him coolly. Finally they realized that he was there in disgrace, and they gave him a job to do: numbering sheets of paper.

When people are very poor and cannot pretend to luxury or find solace in private comforts, only power can give pleasure, as its loss inflicts suffering; worst of all, both the pleasure and the suffering are inadmissable; but other people's glances, their tone of voice, the formulas of politeness change before your eyes. At the same

time, in case of disgrace, the little comforts of life, precarious as they were, disappear. Dionis Paciurea now spoke in a tone of voice utterly without vitality; his gestures were passive, anemic. He no longer talked to Daniela about his work; nor did she refer to the subject. They played with their children, went to the movies, or walked like lovers in the Botanical Gardens—lovers who were sick or convalescent.

Without consulting his wife, Dionis called the Minister to ask for an audience. On the phone, the secretary hesitated:

"I'll let you know."

But nothing happened. Dionis insisted; the secretary was cold the first time, insolent the second. Dionis came one morning to wait at the entrance only the Minister used. Basil Morcovici saw him, shrugged without raising his hat, and walked on toward the door. Dionis stood in his way and humbly asked for an audience.

"Come now," Basil Morcovici said. In his office, he sat down but did not invite Dionis to do the same.

"Well, now?"

"Comrade Minister, I'd like to hand in my resignation."

"Why?" the Minister asked, and his face cleared.

"I've taken my law degree, and I'd like to enter a lawyer's cooperative."

The Minister looked at him. Dionis Paciurea was still a handsome man, he still had his charming blue eyes. A rash on his face would have served him better: he would have awakened pity and engendered in others a secret satisfaction at not being like himself.

"Tell me your real motive," the Minister said, laugh-

ing harshly. "And sit down. Why do you stand there like that?"

"Thank you, Comrade Minister. I prefer to be allowed to leave."

"But what's the matter with you, for heaven's sake? What's going on?"

"Actually, it's Comrade Anania who has something against me."

"No! Be serious. What could he have against you?"

This, in the tone of "But who are you that he should bother about you?" or "What, our good Anania persecuting an innocent man?"

"Tell me about it," the Minister said, and Dionis told him. Morcovici listened with extraordinary satisfaction: he was enjoying the situation to the hilt, though he was careful to control himself. But his face was almost radiant. Finally he said:

"But I know Anania, we've worked together since underground days. Your wife must be hypersensitive. She probably misunderstood something quite harmless. I can't believe it. I don't want to think such things about an old comrade."

"Please accept my resignation," Dionis Paciurea said.

"Send it in," the Minister said.

The next day, Dionis Paciurea was summoned to the meeting of the Party Committee in a cold hall decorated with portraits of Marx, Engel, and Lenin and furnished with locked glass cases full of the works of Lenin and Stalin. The Committee members were waiting for him.

"Sit down," the secretary said; then he pushed a sheet of paper across the table: it was Dionis' resignation.

"The Ministry has consulted us to find out if your resignation was acceptable. What do you think? You're a member of the Party, after all: should we accept it?"

Dionis said nothing. He had understood. The secretary continued:

"Since when does a Communist in a responsible position resign? The Party has put you at a post; stay there and do your job! Let the Party judge when and if you should be transferred. The Comrade Minister laughed when he asked my opinion, but I was ashamed. He asked me for the Committee's support in explaining to you. We'll explain the situation to you. Is this the kind of example one Communist gives to the rest? Is this a Communist's devotion and abnegation? This is shameful! This is revolting!"

The others watched Dionis. They were pathetic, poorly paid, badly fed, miserably dressed. They had only this scrap of power, the right to teach a lesson to a man who had once given them orders, or the power to expel him and throw him out in the street, if they were enjoined or permitted to do so.

"I understand my error, comrades," Dionis said. "My duty is to remain and work with devotion and abnegation, in the post the Party and the State have entrusted me with. I shall make my self-criticism and I promise I shall try to correct myself."

"That's the way to talk," the secretary said. "All right, we're relying on you, but be careful, no backsliding."

Dionis went to see Erasmus Ionesco. The latter had left the Ministry and was working on the Central Committee, in the sector directed by Malvolio Leonte. He

received Dionis amiably and showed a faint surprise at finding him so changed. Dionis said to him:

"Listen, you're my last resort. Only you can get me an audience with Malvolio. Listen, when I speak to you, I'm turning to the Party as to the highest and purest thing there is. I can't bear any more of this. I haven't slept in weeks. Only a couple of hours toward morning. Tell the chief what they're doing to me. It's a crime. People watch, they're not blind, and they tell themselves this is socialism. They're in despair too, only their despair is secret, lasting, the kind that withers and kills everything."

"Wouldn't it be better if you told me what this was all about?" Erasmus asked, smiling. Before that complacent and ecclesiastical smile, Dionis had a moment of terrible hesitation. "Who am I talking to? Is this my last resort?" Yet he talked. After the second sentence, Erasmus lowered his head and stared at the pad of paper in front of him. When Dionis was through, Erasmus said, still looking down:

"And what do you want me to do?"

"But . . . tell your chief about it! They're committing a crime, the Party shouldn't tolerate such a thing!" Dionis Paciurea exclaimed. He was neither handsome nor calm nor seductive now. Anguish and despair had made him ugly.

"My duty is to inform the Party of everything I am told," Erasmus murmured, and said nothing more. Dionis thanked him and left, his mind in turmoil.

At nine the next morning, Erasmus made his daily report to Malvolio Leonte. The chief was fresh, lively, clean-shaven, his clothes recently pressed, like a business-

man who has just come to his office where profitable transactions are waiting for him. All he needed was to be whistling a tune. Erasmus reported everything, phrase by phrase, without comment: it was his informer's job. Malvolio listened to him, smiling and occasionally shrugging with a pretended expression of helplessness or outrage, and with an even falser astonishment that was quite comical to see. He looked like an idle demon who amuses himself playing with his tail. He amused himself enormously.

"Really? My heavens, what a strange story!" he said.

"Yes, comrade," Erasmus murmured piously. "He told me that it was to the Party that he was speaking in my person, because you were so busy he couldn't hope to be received by you."

"Ah yes, not for that, no—not now, in any case, not this month. Was that all?"

"Yes," Erasmus said.

"Fine. Anything else to report?"

Dionis telephoned Erasmus time after time. At each call Erasmus treated him as if he hadn't spoken to him in months:

"Hello! Hello! How are you? What? Oh yes, I remember. No, nothing new. The comrades are so busy. If there's anything new, I'll let you know. Yes, I'll ask again. Good-by."

And he hung up, determined to do nothing at all. Finally Dionis got tired and stopped calling him.

V

Dionis and Daniela Paciurea spoke about this matter for the last time one afternoon early in the summer, just before the Party meetings I'm describing. The children were making too much noise in the next room; someone was speaking too loud in the hall (they shared a single large apartment, in which they had two rooms, with two other families). From time to time the plumbing emitted prolonged groans which Dionis, after so many nights of insomnia, could scarcely endure without beginning to howl himself. On the floor above, a radio was blaring out the latest sports news. In the street, a cracked loudspeaker was roaring folk music made almost unrecognizable by a composer who had been decorated and covered with gold. Dionis and his wife were sitting in front of the table from which Daniela had not yet cleared the dirty dishes and the crumbs; the room smelled of cooking, as did the whole apartment, the whole building.

"You're not telling me about your work," Daniela said.

"Yes, I sit at my desk, and all day long I want to have you beside me and press my knee against yours."

And he took her legs between his own, under the table. And he took her hands in his and said:

"How lovely you are! How lucky I was to meet you! You're the loveliest woman I've ever seen!"

She smiled nervously, for she heard the metallic racket of the loudspeaker and the idiot who was talking in the hall, and she felt like dying. She couldn't bear any more. She said:

"Dionis, don't you think you should see a doctor? For your nerves. For your insomnia."

"What insomnia? It's been much better for a long time now."

"No, it hasn't, don't try to lie, I know the difference between your breathing when you're sleeping and when you're just pretending. I can tell even when *I'm* asleep, and I wake up."

"But why didn't you tell me?" he whispered, smiling. "There must be something better than both of us having insomnia, side by side . . ."

Daniela smiled again. She knew they hadn't made love for three months.

"You could get a doctor to give you a certificate and leave the Ministry," she said.

"All right, I'll try, I promise you."

He didn't tell her he had already tried, and that the doctor, a friend and a Communist, had told him he could do nothing for him: he would have to have confidence and hope to get over this slight nervous shock. "When we shift a region to the kolkhoze system too fast, we have dozens of cases to treat, all peasants. They even commit suicide, poor devils. I'll give you some tonics."

"Yes, I'll see a doctor," Dionis said. The loudspeaker was thundering a Soviet march. Someone was still talking in the hall.

"Dionis," Daniela murmured with the same tense smile, "forgive me! It's my fault that all this has happened. If I hadn't been . . ."

"Shhh, don't say such nonsense. If you hadn't been, my life would be matchwood, straw, do you understand?"

"You're sweet," she said, "but you're a big liar."

He sat down beside her, took her on his knees, pressed her against him, and kissed her velvety, scented cheek; but at the same time he noticed an odor of sweat, sharp and acid. Was she ill? Or just neglecting herself? Daniela didn't offer her lips to him as usual, but jumped down and ran off to scold the children, her voice shrill and harsh. Then she came back and said:

"They're driving me mad. And those imbeciles keep talking out in the hall. It's unbearable, just unbearable."

Dionis looked at her. For the first time he realized how nervous and overwrought she was. "I'm the one who's at fault," he thought. He said:

"Do you want to go to the movies?"

She smiled bitterly:

"To see another Soviet film—so beautiful, so heroic!"

"Darling, calm down, don't get worked up," he murmured. Suddenly she screamed at him:

"Haven't you seen what you look like? Your hair's turned white!"

In the next room, the children stopped talking. The conversation in the hall broke off. Then, hearing nothing after the scream, they began again. Dionis caressed his wife and spoke to her in a low voice, calming her. But she was calm; she had regained control of herself immediately. The pipes rattled and groaned: someone had turned on the water in the apartment above.

The Paciureas never referred to the matter again. But a few days later the secretary of the Party Committee called Daniela into the same hall where he had spoken to Dionis. And the entire Committee was present this

time as well. All five were sitting around a table draped in red. They were sullen and miserable-looking. Daniela sat down facing them, slender and beautiful as the brilliant butterflies of Brazil. The secretary asked:

"How is your health? And your family, your children?"

"Thank you, they're all well," Daniela said. She no longer said anything to anyone. Not even to Dionis. She loved him no less, but she would no longer confide in anyone. She and she alone would have to find a way out.

"Well, comrade, it's like this. We've asked you here after consulting other comrades." (The others had been Morcovici and the man who had incited him, Anania; and the consultation had been an order, politely disguised by the Party jargon.) "We need you for an extremely delicate mission, one which implies great responsibility. It is something we can ask only of a comrade. Anyone else but a Communist would have a sentimental, *petit-bourgeois* attitude. But we know you. The Party has confidence in you."

A silence followed. Daniela didn't move. She was very frightened.

"You are the person closest to Dionis Paciurea, comrade. And we need to know something about him. One thing in particular. The Party has received a report concerning him, and an investigation has been under way for some time. Now you know we are here in an official session, it is the Party which is asking you this question, so you must answer it accordingly: does your husband see Iron Guardists, Zionists, or other agents of imperialism in secret?"

There was a silence. Daniela suddenly burst into sobs

and, alarmed at what she was doing, began looking everywhere for her handkerchief. It was difficult for her to calm herself. The secretary and the others looked at each other: so there was something true in the story after all! But Daniela burst out:

"It's an infamy! This man is honest, loyal, devoted, and you're eliminating him because I didn't want to sleep with Alfred Anania! Do you know how my husband happened to be suspected of dealing with the class enemy? You don't know, but I'll tell you, I'll shout it at the top of my lungs, you hear me? I'll shout it from the rooftops! I'll go all the way to the top, I'll go to Comrade . . ."

"Shhh, don't scream like that! Lower your voice, comrade," the others exclaimed, alarmed. But Daniela told everything, jabbering like a madwoman. The members of the Committee would have preferred to be deaf or somewhere else. Finally one of them managed to say:

"Listen, comrades, we must discuss all this in a different fashion, appoint a commission. We're dealing with something else here."

With difficulty they made Daniela stop talking and sent her away with a promise to "discuss the matter in good time."

She returned home almost skipping with an absurd, morbid gaiety. She described the interview to her husband, who was alarmed:

"My darling, I hope you haven't done something foolish. . . . If only it doesn't turn out badly."

But the next day, it was Dionis who was summoned to the Party meeting, where the Committee members were waiting for him, their faces grim and hostile. They

had telephoned their superiors on the district committee, and several hours later had been called back and shaken like rags.

"Listen, comrade," the secretary said. "We've summoned you because you, at least, seem normal. Your companion must have bad nerves. Yesterday she made a scene that revolted us all. It was indescribable! We didn't want to take steps immediately, because we were too outraged. But you must explain to her that the Party and the State will not permit the slander of responsible militants, the comrades who lead the Party, just because a hysterical woman has hallucinations! Such things are punished by law, and those guilty are dealt with by the Security Service!"

Dionis, alarmed since the night before by what Daniela had told him, realized he was lost. The secretary's brutal tone could mean only one thing: pressure from the top; he was frightened for his own position. Dionis bowed humbly and left as soon as he could.

"You know, I'm afraid nothing will come of your interview. They don't want to listen. You mustn't speak of it again, my darling—to anyone."

Daniela looked at him fixedly, her eyes wide with a stupefaction that gradually faded.

"It didn't work, but don't get upset about it. What could they do to us? Nothing. Nothing important, in any case. All we have to do is resist."

Daniela said nothing. She too was a member of the Party; she had had as much political experience as Dionis. But he was too frightened to think. He could only appear indifferent.

Next came the Party congress that began the freeze,

when I found him so greatly changed. One of their friends was there as well, and told Daniela how Alfred Anania had attacked him. Some time before, Daniela had come to the conclusion that it was she who was the object and the cause of Alfred Anania's hatred, and that it was she who was responsible for her husband's misfortunes. The next day, office colleagues noticed that she had been away from her desk for some time. Someone who worked on the sixth floor saw a chair on the terrace, in front of the railing, a pair of women's shoes on the seat. People came out onto the terrace, leaned over, and saw the crowd on the sidewalk, around Daniela's body. An ambulance was phoned for, which arrived forty minutes later. Meanwhile, the body was covered with newspapers. A chair was brought out onto the sidewalk for Dionis. He remained sitting there, calm, almost smiling. Still a handsome man, but only a face, with nothing behind it any more. People stared at him. He gazed back at them with his beautiful, seductive eyes. He smiled faintly. He was nothing.

Daniela hadn't understood. Among the powerful, hatred is definitive. The Minister, moreover, felt personally offended by the scandal of a public suicide in front of his Ministry. In the Ministerial College, he commented peevishly on the event:

"It was a political gesture. A way of taking a stand. Like his own exhibition, moreover, on that chair, out on the sidewalk. What were they trying to prove? That our people commit suicide? But our Ministry accomplishes eminently *political* work, and an employee tainted by such a scandal can no longer work here—we cannot allow such things."

Dionis Paciurea was discharged two months later. He now has a little job somewhere, quite humble, quite obscure.

But I must get back to what was happening to us.

✳✳✳✳

CHAPTER

6

I

On the third day of the Party conference I'm describing, we all thought that Malvolio was going to settle his accounts with Leonas Tanase. His bitterness dated from the thaw, when Diocletian had begun to invade the zone of Malvolio's power with his own prerogatives and authority. We all knew that if Malvolio survived the thaw, he would also be on the watch for an occasion to get Leonas Tanase, like a big tomcat in front of a mousehole: he had a very good memory and never forgave anyone. But to describe his vengeance, I must first describe the offense which took place during a meeting at the Central Committee. It was a beautiful May morning, everyone was in linen suits or shirtsleeves, and every-

one—except the arctic fauna, and no one paid any attention to them—was in a good humor, almost happy. Stalin was dead, the ice had withdrawn, an era of limitless progress was beginning that could lead to democracy, to freedom; everything would be better. There were several groups in the hall, and many pairs of friends who had no fear of sitting side by side or of chatting gaily and without constraint during the pauses in the discussion. Three years later, only mutual fear made them speak civilly; without it, they would have strangled each other instead. Polar animals on a block of ice swept out to sea by the current: filled with an obscure fear of dying, the wolf, the bear, and the polar fox sit side by side and bite each other only out of despair, when they feel the others pushing them into the water. Three years later, the friendships were wrecked or changed into complicities, the groups had collapsed and decomposed, everyone had betrayed the others and himself, and all were ready for the great glacial mutation.

That spring, in the middle of the thaw, it was completely different. The lion, a solar animal, ruled in the person of Diocletian Sava; Malvolio was looking for some corner of the tundra where he could hibernate until his time came. But they wouldn't leave him in peace. He was sitting next to Diocletian at the red-draped table on the stand, the microphones in front of them, both fat, enormous, but Diocletian even bigger than Malvolio, huge, apple-cheeked, assured, while Malvolio pulled his Ukrainian-grandmother face. Yet he seemed at ease, told anecdotes in his neighbor's ear, and laughed: an alert, well-fed bear with glistening fur, or a fat devil jumping over his tail to kill time.

"Pay attention to the discussion, Leonte, you're the one who's concerned by what's being said at the moment!" Diocletian snapped, his voice full of contempt. Malvolio's face turned to stone. It was Leonas Tanase who was speaking: short, slender, athletic, blond, pink, his eyes blue, his neck stiff, his chin prominent. I was fond of him, but others said he was mediocre, unoriginal. He spoke without raising his voice, but firmly:

"We cannot admit the methods . . . of prison guards! We are Communists, and that means, in my opinion, that we are conscientious men who want a decision explained to them, instead of being given orders or a purely verbal and ridiculous explanation that means nothing!"

Malvolio Leonte looked as though someone had suddenly painted his face gray. He exclaimed:

"Comrade Leonas Tanase! Will you be more explicit? Drop your demagoguery and tell us what it is you're talking about!"

He had spoken aggressively, his heavy voice was insulting—the bear annoyed in his winter den. Leonas answered firmly, but as a man who knows he's risking everything but life and liberty—which is still a great deal:

"I'm talking about the section of the Central Committee and its methods!"

Malvolio was in charge of the section in question. His face darkened; he lowered his nose and pretended to be taking notes. There was a silence in the hall; we were all alarmed by Leonas Tanase's temerity and by what Malvolio's expression implied. Obviously Malvolio was a boreal animal; obviously Stalin was dead; obviously

verything was going to improve, hence Malvolio's claws ere going to be clipped. Nonetheless, he was very, very owerful. Diocletian had only to undermine his power nd then knock him down with a stroke of his lion's aw. But the rest of us couldn't intervene, and perhaps we wouldn't even have been welcome to do so. Diocletian said with somber satisfaction, in a tone of simple grandeur:

"Continue, comrade."

That was all. Thereafter, I knew that Leonas had a debt to pay to Malvolio: tiny and temerarious, he had stepped between two opposing monsters. And three years later, on the third day of the revisionist debates, I saw him on the stand too, and as soon as I heard the questions being asked him, I understood: they wanted his neck. It was Malvolio's men who were asking the questions. They had been kept in the wings for just such an opportunity. Now they were hard after their prey, like pike in a fishpond. Isaias Proorocesco asked:

"Does the comrade maintain what he declared before an investigating commission, that is, that the Party entrusted him, in the underground days, with the task of working with a Fascist? If the answer is yes, did he not risk falling into the hands of the Secret Police and of putting the entire network in danger?"

These were deadly accusations. Leonas Tanase answered:

"But . . . yes, of course! The answer is *yes* to both questions."

Malvolio thundered from the presidium:

"Could you have been denounced?"

"Theoretically, yes."

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"Theoretically, yes."

"And practically?" Malvolio asked, with such good humor that the audience began laughing—they always laughed at his jokes. Leonas Tanase blushed and said:

"Practically, too. But nothing of the kind happened."

"That isn't the question. But you could have been arrested and tortured until you betrayed your comrades?"

"I would have bitten off my tongue first," Leonas answered calmly, with such intensity that a murmur of sympathy ran through the hall. Malvolio noticed it and acted quickly:

"If you hadn't spoken, they would have killed you?"

"It's possible," Leonas answered.

He was irritating, I must admit, to as great a master of casuistry as Malvolio: Leonas Tanase was so honest that whatever he said won people's sympathy. So Malvolio began to scream savagely:

"You're saying the Party was sending people to their death?"

"Do you suppose, comrades, that in war you can take positions without losing men?" Leonas asked smiling. Malvolio smiled too, but bitterly, as he said:

"My opinion, comrade, is that the Party abandoned a maneuver rather than endanger the lives of its militants. I have no intention of discussing the personality of J. V. Stalin here. But his principle that 'man is the most precious capital of all' is not his alone: it is one of the sacred ideas of Marxism-Leninism!"

He had spoken very loud and ended on a shout: the sacramental roar petrified the hall. Malvolio was working for Radio Moscow when Leonas Tanase was risking his skin in Bucharest.

"Comrade," Malvolio said to the man he had re-

duced to the role of a mere supernumerary, "you haven't understood the task entrusted to you, and you have an extremely confused idea, to say the least, of the Party's attitude concerning the human factor."

Beside Malvolio, Alfred Anania, who had hitherto said nothing, looked up:

"It is a conception alien to the Party. Who, according to you, entrusted you with this mission?"

"Comrade Panaït Petre, who is dead, but there was also Comrade Paraschiv Ionesco, who is here."

Paraschiv Ionesco shrugged his shoulders and said:

"I no longer remember the details. I think that the comrade misunderstood."

Leonas Tanase gave him a long look, then said:

"No, comrade, I understood perfectly, and I carried out my mission. Are there any more questions?"

A man raised his hand, and Malvolio gave him the floor. He had been in charge of provisions and liaisons in the International Brigades in Spain, and though his name was quite different, he was nicknamed Pedro José. Arthur Zodie, sitting beside me, whispered:

"You'll see: he'll ask him if he loves the people."

Pedro José, a member of Malvolio's gang, was famous for asking questions that implied doubt concerning the most elementary honesty of the man being questioned.

"Does the comrade love the people?" Pedro José asked. Leonas Tanase answered in a sharp, quick voice:

"Yes."

And he stepped off the dais in a great silence. The debate continued—exhausting, furious, bewildering. At the end, just as we were leaving, the pressure of the crowd knocked me into Leonas Tanase. I said to him:

"Bravo, my friend. At least you didn't let them get you." Prospero Dobre was near us. I was afraid I had offended him: he had made such a pathetic self-criticism. He had heard what I said; he grinned bitterly, and remarked:

"Leonas has something that's sacred to him, and that sustains him."

"As if nothing was sacred to you!" Leonas answered. Then, turning to me: "We can walk home together, we're almost neighbors, after all."

And as we walked off, I said to him:

"Poor Prospero! I don't see him publishing his *Mechanics of Revolutions* soon."

"As a matter of fact, not for the moment," Leonas said.

"Not for the moment—what do you mean?"

"Well . . . not for the next five or ten or twenty years."

We walked along together, stopping in Stalin Square. The lights, through the leaves of the trees on Stalin Boulevard, were green. The bronze statue of Stalin, the work of Pius Dabija—another man of our generation—reigned majestically over the square. Leonas Tanase began to laugh, shaking his head:

"What people! What people! Did you hear them? They wanted to prove to me that I'm crazy, that I didn't understand what I was told. What people!"

Then he told me how it had happened.

II

It was in 1944, after the Uman disaster. Our army was crushed, the German armies in disorder; the front was approaching, in a few weeks the Russians would be across the border, overrunning the country. Fierce battles were likely, even in Bucharest itself. One evening, Leonas Tanase, editor of a newspaper, was sitting at his desk, armed with a red pencil and a paste-pot, reading the last-minute bulletins. He had taken off his jacket. His forehead was drenched with sweat. The building trembled faintly: in the basement, the presses were finishing the evening edition. It was warm already, you could hear the gypsy violins in the outdoor restaurants, the air smelled of lilacs and *mititei* fried with garlic and spices; it was an evening for drinking beer and listening to music, for buying a flower from a ragged, barefoot gypsy girl with gentle eyes and a cigarette butt in the corner of her mouth; an evening for killing time and then making love until morning.

But Leonas was cutting and pasting dispatches. A dark man with a carefully clipped mustache and a navy-blue suit came in. He signed his articles *Observer,* and everything about him was Anglo-Saxon except his dark complexion and the whites of his purplish eyes: Mandravela, the gypsy slums. And a thousand years ago, the valley of the Indus.

"What about my article?" he asked.

"We can't use it. You want to go to prison? You forget that we're the allies of the Great Reich. You write about *Marshal* Stalin and *Prime Minister* Churchill, you can't do it, don't be a fool!" Leonas Tanase said with a laugh.

"Who do you think you are? A censor? A German?"

"No, but I want to get the paper out tomorrow. That's my job. And with your International News, the censor will suspend publication."

"Leonas, don't be a fool," Observer said. "In a few months, it'll be good to be suspended, even arrested."

Leonas, still smiling, shook his head:

"Talk about that with the boss. I'm not in charge of policy around here."

Observer sighed and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"You don't understand anything. You don't understand the nation's political tradition. Do you have a cigarette?"

"No."

"I feel like going out and finding a girl," Observer said. "Nights like this drive me crazy. Lend me some cash."

Leonas looked through the pockets of his jacket hanging over the back of the chair. He found a banknote and handed it to Observer, who said:

"Thanks, Leonas. Good night."

He left and Leonas dialed a number:

"Tery? Have you been back long? Yes, I still have work to do, probably all night, I want to see tomorrow's paper through. I'd like to be with you. That's why I phoned. Yes, there are lilacs here too. But what can you do? All right, then, good night."

Then he went back to pasting dispatches. Moths were scorching themselves against the light bulb, falling on the desk, the paper, his hands.

Claude Ioanovici, the owner of the paper, came in. He was clean-shaven, wore a white shirt and a new tie, and looked like Napoleon Bonaparte, only fatter, more

Levantine. The great journalist Claude Ioanovici, owner of the paper and Director of the Press in Marshal Antonesco's moderately Fascist government. He was pale and looked very annoyed.

"All right, Leonas? Had dinner? If you haven't, come with me, I'm alone and didn't even have time for lunch."

Leonas looked at his watch: ten o'clock. He pulled on his jacket and followed his boss. In the street, Claude Ioanovici said to him:

"I need to talk to someone, to a friend. I'm glad I found you. You're . . . well, I feel calmer, when I talk to you. You're the only one I can trust."

They walked into the Continental. It was quite empty. A few elegant couples, a table of German officers with silver braid, and the gypsies who were playing "Lili Marlene." They sat down. Claude said:

"Order for me too. Something terrible has happened." When the waiter had left, he went on:

"They've arrested a cousin of mine. A Communist. I didn't even know it. A nice boy, very quiet, very reserved. A promising lawyer, too, full of talent. And a conspirator! They've beaten them all terribly. One or two have confessed what the Secret Police wanted to know. They'll be shot."

He gasped for breath.

"I'm on good terms with the head of the Secret Police, Eugene Cristesco. He showed me . . ."

The waiter came with the soup. Claude said nothing. Leonas began eating. Claude didn't move.

"I can't eat," he said. "I want to save him and I don't know how. And they'll go on torturing them. They're looking for the leader, the one who's in contact with the

Party. Someone called Leo, some Jew. He's the one they want. They kept referring to him."

Leonas, who was swallowing his soup, tried to keep his hand from trembling, tried to keep his spoon from rattling against his teeth. Leo was Leonas; not a mysterious Jew but Leon Tanase, son of a peasant. Claude didn't notice anything. They went back to the paper; Leonas saw the next day's issue through the press and left through the empty Strada Sarindar, passing the bordellos of the Strada Brezoiano, and then the empty Cismigi that smelled of wet earth and night-blooming flowers, under old trees full of nightingales. Leonas wakened a sleeping taxi driver, gave him an address, got out, walked on through the empty streets in the old quarter of Bucharest, asleep under its lindens and walnuts, near the Olteni Church. He stopped in front of a window, rapped quickly three times, then three times with long pauses. The curtain was pulled aside and a man half asleep opened the window.

"They've all been caught," Leonas murmured.

"To whom do I make my report?" the man asked.

"Tomorrow," Leonas said, "at four in the afternoon. Strada Sapientei, a man reading the *Presa.* You'll ask him, 'Is it today's paper?' and he'll answer, 'It's a double issue.' "

Leonas left without another word and heard the window being closed behind him. He turned a corner, made several zigzags through the neighborhood to the Church of Saint Venus (Sfanta Vinere), and took a taxi to the Strada Ion Slavici. From here he continued on foot and used his key to get into a courtyard full of lilacs, then into a vestibule with cheap lace curtains, and finally

into his own room, which he had rented under the name of Tone, saying he worked for the telephone company on the night shift.

He stretched out on the brass bed and waited for sleep to come. Tavern music floated through the open window, the violins, the grumbling of the double bass, and a harsh, charming gypsy voice:

I put some *busuyok* in my hair
To drive men mad with love

They were being tortured now. The rubber truncheons. They were hanging by their hands, or by their ankles. Or worse. Things that can't be put on paper, but which the wretched natives of the East, the East where the sun rises, have always known. Leonas himself would soon be with them. "If they catch me and I feel I can't keep from talking, I'll wait for the first minute I'm alone and crack my head open against the wall." This notion calmed him. He was cold. He realized that he was drenched with perspiration. If only Theresa was with him. Beside him, naked in the warm air like a milk bath. Only to press his thigh against Theresa's. Nothing more. He couldn't have done anything more. Outside, the sun was rising. "Are they still torturing them?" Leonas Tanase wondered. His eyes closed. He fell asleep. He dreamed he had been questioned by the Secret Police. Not that he *was being* questioned, that he *had been* questioned. That he had talked! Everything was lost. He wakened with his heart pounding with anguish and horror, then fell asleep again.

III

The next morning, he went back to his own room, or rather to Theresa's. She was waiting for him, sitting on the couch.

"Why aren't you at your job?" he asked. She smiled, her hands on her knees. She was attractive, warm, not beautiful. She spoke to him like a big girl of sixteen to a boy of fourteen.

"I'm sick. And you?"

"Nothing. Everything's fine. Let's go for a walk in the Cismigi."

They went out, hand in hand, to look at the swans. The old men on their chairs, the mothers or nurses with the baby carriages, the soldiers on leave with the Transylvanian servant-girls on their arms paid no attention to this ordinary-looking couple, and heard nothing of what they were saying to each other in low tones. Theresa was saying:

"It's a question of months."

"Yes," Leonas said. "But these are the months we have to survive."

"Oh," she said, "how wonderful it will be, how wonderful! Just think, when we'll look back on these moments!"

And she began laughing like a girl. He shook his head dubiously:

"Yes, but we have to survive until then."

They walked back toward the city. They left the seethe of foliage and the green water of the Cismigi behind. They were in the Strada Academiei when a siren began screaming in the distance, and others closer, and suddenly one right over them, on top of a ten-story

building. Pedestrians began running, crossing the street; an old lady slipped and fell on her hands and knees, her umbrella rolling down the sidewalk. Leonas picked her up, handed her the umbrella, took Theresa's hand, and began to run. Somewhere on the outskirts of the city, guns started firing. Through the noise, they could hear a tremendous vibration. A few seconds later the sound grew deafening, the flak salvos exploded quite close and Leonas, looking up, glimpsed the rows of shiny crosses high in the sky, diaphanous and silvery: the first waves of bombers. Leonas and Theresa had reached the corner of the Strada Doamnei. In front of them, on the other sidewalk, stood the blackened bronze statue of Boniface Coziano (Statesman, 1842-1904). Leonas shouted:

"Here, there's a shelter!" and dragged Theresa after him into a vestibule of a modern building with fake marble walls, and enormous glass doors. As they were going in, a shrill whistle suddenly grew louder. They saw people pressed up against the walls. Leonas threw Theresa to the ground and covered her with his body. Then he felt a sharp pain in his ears. He suddenly was thrown into the air and fell back. At the same second, a cascade of glass: the windows falling in. The doors opened and slammed shut. Tremendous blows shook the ground. But after two or three seconds the uproar faded, there was nothing more than the flak that seemed to be firing from the nearby rooftops. Leonas Tanase realized that he was sitting on the ground and shook Theresa by the shoulders.

"Tery, Tery! What's the matter?" he cried. She looked bewildered. Then her eyes focused, and she said:

"You're wounded!"

"It's nothing!" he shouted, stood up, and picked up his wife under the arms. The vestibule was full of masonry, of broken glass, and a man was sitting with his back to the wall: his eyes had burst out of their sockets and were running down his cheeks, the blood spattering out of his nose and ears and mouth. Leonas dragged Theresa outside. On the sixth floor, a woman was screaming hysterically:

"A black man on my balcony! A black man on my balcony!"

Leonas Tanase looked up: indeed, on the sixth-floor balcony of the building across the street, the blackened statue of Boniface Coziano was lying on its side, one foot and hand in the air. Leonas began laughing. Theresa, frightened, shouted:

"Don't laugh like that! Don't laugh like that!"

Fifteen minutes later, it was all over. A huge cloud of dust and smoke floated over Bucharest. Official cars and the wealthy were leaving the city. Claude Ioanovici's Horch stopped in the Strada Sarindar. Elaborately made up, her hair wrapped in a silk scarf, smoking a cigarette in a long amber holder, his wife was waiting in the car. Her husband went up to the city desk and found Leonas, his forehead bandaged, finishing the paper.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Nothing, a piece of stone."

"I leave the paper in your hands. I'm driving my wife to Snagov and coming back to the city."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of the paper," Leonas said. His boss glanced at him gratefully and left. Downstairs, Madame Ioanovici said:

"Another ten minutes wasted. And they can come back from one minute to the next."

"I had to see Leonas; after all, he's the one who puts out my paper," her husband said.

"That's what he's paid for," Madame Ioanovici said. Her husband sighed, pressed the starter, and lifted his foot off the brake.

During the afternoon, Leonas went to meet a man he didn't know but who knew the password and wore a carnation in his buttonhole. This man spoke only one sentence to him:

"At ten, at Marcel's."

IV

Marcel had a room and bath in the Calea Dorobanti. He was often visited by people he didn't know. The visitors talked in his room. Marcel retired to the bathroom, put the lid down on the toilet, and sat and read a novel. When the visitors were through, they knocked on the bathroom door and Marcel let them out, discreetly. After the Party came to power, during the big purge of 1949, he was expelled from the Party. He was a weak man who had nothing else in the world. So he went to his room, took to his bed with fever, and died.

But on that night, in 1944, he was sitting on the lid of the toilet and reading a novel. In the room, two men were staring hard at a third. They were Paraschiv Ionesco, tall, robust, pug-nosed, stubborn and energetic-looking, still young, still without fat, not yet disfigured

by age and power; and Panaït Petre, short, heavy, dark, with a bold and disturbing stare. The third man was Leonas, short, pink, and squat, who finally made up his mind to speak and said:

"It's too dangerous."

"It's necessary, Leonas," Paraschiv Ionesco said. "In a few weeks, the front will be here. The Party will order an armed insurrection, if it decides it should. It may even come to seizing power."

"Do you understand why we need a mass-circulation paper?" Panaït Petre asked. "Apropos," he added, and he took out of his pocket a newspaper twice the size of his hand printed on rice paper. It was the *Romania Libera,* the Party newspaper. He held it out to Leonas who put it in his pocket without looking at it.

"You understand now why we need a supply of paper. We can't risk not knowing where to get it. The paper's controlled by the Director of the Press, and the Director of the Press is Claude Ioanovici, and you're his friend. You have to talk to him," Panaït Petre said.

"And what if he gets scared? What if he turns me over to the police?"

"Is he your friend, or isn't he?"

"Yes, he's my friend, but not like the three of us are friends! I don't know how he'll react to this!"

He didn't know either that fifteen years later one of these friends, Paraschiv Ionesco, would abandon him in order not to displease Malvolio Leonte.

"The Party has no other solution. If there had been another, we wouldn't be risking your skin. But I repeat: otherwise, we'll find ourselves without a newspaper, without a means of acting on the masses. A news-

paper, posters, manifestos. You understand? It's all up to you."

"All right," Leonas said. "I'll try." The other man smiled and embraced him. Panaït Petre was like that. A hero, and a pure man. I knew him too. He died in time. Leonas left first. "If I'm caught," he told himself, "I won't talk. Better to die. I'll try to die rather than . . ." He was terribly afraid of talking under torture. And he mustn't talk.

All the street lights were out as a protection against the planes. But the sky was red, and great clouds of copper-colored smoke were rolling overhead from the direction of the North Station, which had been burning since morning.

That night, Leonas Tanase slept alone again, in another of the five apartments he had rented under false names. Again he dreamed that he had been captured and tortured, and that he had talked. He woke up and couldn't fall asleep again. Claude had been his friend since childhood, Claude was good, kind, sensitive. But he was a dignitary of the regime, a creature of Marshal Antonesco; he had thrown in his lot with that of the regime, which was clinging to power by distributing death penalties right and left. He was going to be very, very frightened. He might see in Leonas, not the friend, but the possible successor, the political enemy, the Communist who might condemn him in his turn to social or even physical death. And then?

"It's a risk I have to take," Leonas Tanase decided. "It will depend on the way I put it to him."

The next day, he telephoned his wife (she was working in the Vichy press agency).

"Are you at the office? Can you come to the house for a few minutes?"

"Yes, right away," she answered calmly. She had understood that something was happening. She always understood. She was like that. Leonas hung up and walked out of the empty, filthy city room, its floor full of globs of spit, cigarette butts, and crumpled papers.

Outside, the glorious morning sun of Bucharest was shining, at the hour when the pavements had just been watered, when the gypsy women were squatting on their black heels, their many-colored skirts bunched up over their knees, and selling big baskets full of fresh flowers still dripping with water. The Cismigi spilled its foliage over the fence, like an explosion of vegetable power, an omnipotent efflorescence of earth that was too rich, too fertile. The pretty students walked by, or the pairs of grave lovers, their faces haunted. The red and yellow streetcars looked like flowers too. Everything smelled of wet foliage, the gypsy women were selling iris, jonquils, wild roses, and life seemed enormous and innocent. All that is over now; except for the sky and the light, everything is sad and hard. But Leonas, who was preparing this new world, already belonged to it; he was frozen with anguish; everything around him had ceased to exist for him. He didn't even realize that the fires had been put out during the night. He knew only one thing: the next day, at the same time, he might be questioned and beaten with rubber truncheons; and later they might take him along Giurgiu Avenue, past the Bello cemetery, into the Valley of the Nightingales, tie him to a stake, and shoot him.

Theresa was waiting for him. She was walking up and

down the room, her arms crossed. When Leonas came in, she stopped and looked at him strangely. He took her in his arms and kissed her. Then he sat on the bed and made her sit beside him.

"What is it?" Theresa asked.

"Nothing," Leonas answered. "Nothing special. Listen, Tery."

He stopped, then he repeated:

"Listen, Tery."

He was staring hard at the floor. Was Claude going to betray him? Not out of cowardice, nor out of infamy. Claude was a good man. But out of weakness? Could he ask Claude to risk his life? "It will depend on the way I put it to him." He shook his head and tried to pluck up his courage. He was holding Theresa's hands in his own.

"Listen, Tery: I want you to sleep somewhere else tonight and tomorrow night. All right?"

"Yes," she said. She looked at him attentively.

"And listen: if I call you and say, 'Everything's all right,' you can talk to me. Otherwise say, 'You've dialed the wrong number,' hang up, and get out. Understand?"

"I understand," Theresa murmured. She gazed at him. She wanted to be able to remember his face, for this might be their last meeting. He smiled and stood up. Theresa pressed close against him and whispered:

"Don't you want to stay?"

He patted her shoulder and said:

"I can't. Be careful. And don't get upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm careful. Good luck. I'll be waiting for you," Theresa murmured. They kissed each other

and Leonas left. Theresa stood on the landing for a minute, watching him go down the stairs. Then she went back inside and began walking up and down her room again. Obviously they had to know as little as possible about each other, in case they were questioned and tortured. But it was hard. She sighed, her mouth open. When would it be over? It couldn't last much longer. Why couldn't it be over now?

Leonas asked his boss to meet him in town on personal and urgent business. Claude, astonished, suggested his mother's house at five in the afternoon. Meanwhile Leonas read dispatches and cut up articles and bulletins. Something was forming inside him, hard and angular and cold as a diamond. At five he went to the meeting place and found the Horch parked in front of the door. He went in, and as the door closed behind him a soft bell rang. Madame Ioanovici lived on a little pension from her years as a post office employee. Her son had taken her to Snagov too. The house was empty, the curtains drawn, the shades lowered. Leonas saw a man in a dim mirror. It was himself. Claude came out of a room at the sound of the bell and found Leonas in the wretched little living room. He held out his hand.

"Sit down."

"No, thank you," Leonas said. "Is there anyone in the house?"

"No, no one. Why?" the other man answered, surprised. Leonas talked to him in a tone of voice he had never used to his boss and friend:

"Listen, Claude, you see what's happening. The war is lost. The Russians are coming. You're in danger of being shot. I'm offering you your only chance of salva-

tion. Do something for the Communist Party. Starting today, you'll put one roll of paper in the cellar every day. The moment Antonesco's thrown out, the Communist Party will bring out a newspaper. Do you understand me?"

He had spoken dryly, harshly. Claude Ioanovici turned pale as a whitewashed wall. He asked:

"Did the Communists send you?"

Instead of answering, Leonas took the clandestine paper out of his pocket and handed it to Claude, who looked at it, but pulled his hand away.

"You're crazy!" he whispered.

"Yes, but so are you. I'm risking my neck now. You're risking yours after."

There was a silence. Claude Ioanovici looked at him sadly, reproachfully.

"Why did you do this to me?"

"The time will come when you'll be grateful to me," Leonas said. Claude Ioanovici bent his head and took three steps across the room. Leonas said:

"If you turn me in, they'll shoot me. But I won't talk. On the other hand, you'll only stay alive until the Russians get here. Maybe not even that long."

"Why are you talking to me this way?"

"Because I have to. I'm leaving now. Tonight, two rolls of paper."

He left without another word. He walked back to the editorial offices, crossing the Mihaï-Voda Bridge and taking the Strada Brezoiano, mingling with the crowd; he felt alien to them. The air was warm and sweet-smelling, everyone was beautiful, the gray cupola of the Treasury against the pearly sky gave him a sudden burst

of happiness. Tonight he might be arrested and clubbed. "I've done everything I could. I don't see how I could have done better." He went upstairs to his office, sat down at his desk in front of the piles of bulletins. He began working. Claude Ioanovici crossed the room without looking at anyone and locked himself in his office. Leonas Tanase, blond, pink, sweating, worked at his desk without raising his head. Around nine that night he came downstairs to the printing room. Four workers were pushing the enormous rolls of paper down planks from the sidewalk to the cellar storeroom.

"Hey, you there! What are you doing with that paper?"

"The boss told us we should put it down here," one of the men answered. Leonas said nothing. He felt nothing. He went out into the street. Swarms of ragged, barefoot little boys were running down the Strada Sarindar toward the Calea Victoriei, shouting:

"Extra, extra! Big losses, many killed!"

Leonas saw the old janitor who was sitting on a chair on the sidewalk and asked after his health in a friendly tone, then he went back upstairs to the city room to telephone Theresa.

V

That was the story Leonas told me, walking back and forth in front of his house under the flowering lindens with their heady, sweet perfume.

"Let Malvolio do all the harm he wants," Leonas was saying. "I've been expelled twice already; then, when

Anna was out, the party took me back, forgot about everything. And Malvolio's not the only man in the Party; there are people who know me. So you see . . . actually I've had my ups and downs, I've been a minister, I've been on the sidewalk, I've been an assistant professor of Marxism-Leninism, I'm a director-general —well, why stop now?"

And he laughed aloud. He was a good man, moderate, discreet, humane.

"Theresa's waiting for me, and the boy's in bed. Will you come in and have something?" he said.

I refused: my wife was waiting for me, too. I left alone, walking, under a beautiful golden moon. Would he get off? Would I?

Malvolio wasn't the only man in the Party. There were people as powerful as he (you could count them on the fingers of one hand), people who didn't like him and were trying to get him so worked up he would make a mistake. Leonas Tanase was thrown out. But one of those other powerful men took him in and made him vice-minister in a department to which Malvolio's authority did not extend. Leonas got off very well.

I wasn't going to get off at all.

✳✳✳✳

CHAPTER

7

I

The only way to escape the Ice Age is to keep away from it. This applies to all the machinery of destiny: one must manage to isolate oneself. Leonas Tanase escaped by purity, wisdom, and moderation. My other friend, Arthur Zodie, by folly. He was always whimsical and unpredictable, but even in Stalin's lifetime, long before the thaw, a certain thing happened to him, or at least he thought it happened to him. It was on New Year's Eve, and in those days we still dared to celebrate, invite guests, drink, sing. Arthur had eaten a lot, drunk more. He left the party surreptitiously, without anyone's noticing. Someone said the maid had seen him, had even helped him on with his coat, and had asked him:

"You're leaving already?"

And apparently Arthur, his face red and shiny, had answered:

"No, I'm not leaving. I'm taking a little walk to get some air, then I'll be back."

He told me everything, afterwards. He had had no foreboding, nothing. He was feeling fine, but suddenly it was too warm inside; he had felt a sudden and irresistible need to leave. And here he was in the empty street, in the wet fog of that snowless night. No cars, two or three pedestrians, dead drunk, then no one. Arthur was wearing a fur-lined coat that hung open over his belly, strolling along with his hands clasped behind his back. He was getting some air at last, when suddenly his face felt cold, his collar wet with sweat. He buttoned up his coat and then he heard someone walking behind him. "What an echo this street has!" he thought. Then he realized that someone was following him. Arthur walked faster—the footsteps caught up with him. Arthur turned his head and saw an ordinary-looking man dressed in black with a big round puffy face, yellow as mutton fat. "What a face!" Arthur thought and walked faster. The other man imitated him. Arthur felt a vague anxiety. He listened harder now. "What a nasty-looking customer!" he was thinking. The other man's steps were echoed through the street; they seemed to be catching up to him. Arthur shuddered. "What does he want? Is he a lunatic, a thief? It's a policeman, he wants to arrest me!" The stranger was violently antipathetic to him; Arthur actually detested him. And later he said that suddenly he began to suspect who he could be. The fact is that the individual had caught up with him and was walking along beside

him. Arthur, paralyzed with fear, didn't dare look at him. Now he thought he knew who the man was. With an insolent, revolting familiarity, the man asked:

"Listen, is this the Strada Stirbey-Voda?"

"Yes," Arthur answered in a choked voice. It had never seemed so long and empty.

"Have you noticed that the bread in the bakeries was blacker than usual today?" the stranger asked. Arthur didn't answer. How could he get away? Suddenly he remembered, in his anguish, that Valentine Ionesco lived on this street. It wasn't far. Arthur began to run as fast as he could. And he heard the other man running behind him. He pushed open the outside door, ran up the stairs four at a time, and rang the doorbell. The street door slammed again and his pursuer's footsteps echoed up the stairs. Panting, Arthur wondered if Valentine had been invited somewhere else, as was to be expected on New Year's Eve. The steps climbed higher; Arthur wanted to disappear, to vanish on the spot, to wake up. The door opened and Valentine appeared. She was charming, so pretty with her great velvety eyes, her childish yet voluptuous smile; she was wearing a red satin housecoat. Her expression was sweet and kind as always. But she didn't seem to see Arthur. She was looking over his shoulder at someone coming up the stairs. Arthur jumped to one side. The stranger went in. Arthur saw Valentine smile and turn slowly toward him: in a second, she would see him. Arthur turned on his heels and dashed down the stairs. He didn't stop running until he reached the friends whose house he had left, and at first he wouldn't say a word. It was only later on that he told us, and of course no one believed him. But the remarkable thing

was that Arthur avoided Valentine after that and always left places where she was expected or where she turned up. We told Valentine the story too late, when she could no longer remember what she had done on New Year's Eve that year.

"But I can promise you one thing: I never spent a New Year's Eve at home—I've always been asked out. Arthur's nice, but he's completely mad," she said. "It's funny, he wasn't at all like that when I knew him. He's changed."

II

Afterward our crazy Arthur began saying he recognized *him* among us, and identifying *him* with a certain person. We learned this one winter night, long before the events I'm relating here. But I have to go back to this period in order to explain the role played by the person in question in relation to my own destiny.

At this period, in the last days before the thaw, our group—young men a little drunk with the total power of which we were the instruments and (in a small way) the beneficiaries—spent hours and even whole nights in the bar of the Athénée Palace on the Palace Square. The official cars picked us up at our offices; they waited for us in front of Capsa's or the Athénée Palace. The chauffeurs went to drink in a bistro on the old Strada Clemenceau, rebaptized Gabriel Peri, and called for us, more or less drunk by then, when everything was closing.

The sage and the initiate in our group was Tinel Zambilovici. He was slender, almost without any body at all: well-cut, worn clothes hung from his skinny shoulders.

However, his head was everything: enormous, with the forehead bulging too high and a tiny bitter face half-concealed beneath it. Tinel had the skull of a man of genius or a Martian and the face of Mephistopheles. He was excessively intelligent, sarcastic, and constantly ridiculed the rest of us; his laugh revealed yellow and rotting stumps that he never had taken care of but never seemed to suffer from. Brandy kept him in a state of permanent anesthesia.

Leopold was there with the two of us. His real name wasn't Leopold; like everyone else, he had a name that ended in *-esco* or *-eano,* but the rest of us, who were afraid of him, had baptized him Leopold out of some alcoholic whim. In what follows, I shall continue to call him Leopold; he played a sufficiently fatal role in the whole business—I mean the freeze—for me not to want to remember his real name. He had an innocent, sweet, smiling expression. He didn't drink alcohol: he was afraid of getting drunk. He drank dozens of cups of coffee and never paid. He was polite, affable, even sentimental as he stared at us from under his long lashes and asked questions.

"When you come down to it, what should you believe in?"

Tinel Zambilovici smiled diabolically.

"You need a faith like a woman needs a man, Leopold. You have a feminine soul. Be virile: endure nihilism."

"Are you a nihilist?" Leopold asked with an innocent stare. Arthur Zodie giggled in that shrill way of his.

"Hee hee hee! Hee hee! He's not a nihilist! Not at all. He has faith. So do I. I'm a Bogomil and he's a Cathar! We're both buggers. Now you know."

"Are we having a serious discussion, or what?" Leopold asked.

"We're not discussing, we're telling you, that's what you want, isn't it? Hee hee! Hee hee hee!"

We were in one of the red leather booths of the Athénée Palace bar. The other drinkers turned around to look at us. The bartender didn't react because we came in chauffeur-driven cars that were waiting for us outside. Of course, he was going to make his report, as he did every night, to the proper authorities.

"Monsieur George!" Arthur Zodie exclaimed. Prosperous, even flourishing, the *maître d'hôtel* of the Athénée Palace had a bald, pointed head, thick lips, and the heavy nose of a Sumerian statue. He liked us. He liked everyone in the country that had filed before him for the last quarter of a century in the Athénée Palace bar.

"Two glasses of cognac, a bottle of beer. No more coffee for the comrade here. He doesn't want any more."

Leopold looked at him with a tender smile. He wasn't offended, not even annoyed. He wanted to learn something. He learned nothing more than their bugger's faith. Later in the evening, we were strolling through the foggy streets that ran up the Dambovitza. We were talking very loud, I don't remember about what. The police stared after us. We were taking Leopold back home; we wished him good night. He was annoyed now. An empty taxi passed.

"Taxi!" Arthur Zodie shrieked. We got in. "To the Athénée Palace!" Arthur Zodie said, and we drove off, roaring with laughter.

Our cars were still waiting in front of the Athénée's Corinthian portico. The drivers in their *traktir* were still

drinking. The Palace Square was completely empty. We went back to the bar and asked for our favorite drinks—cognac for them, beer for me.

"I feel better now," Arthur Zodie said. "Now we can talk."

But he glanced around him suspiciously. Tinel Zambilovici murmured:

"Don't worry, no microphones in places like this, the sound gets too blurred."

"Oh, good. Monsieur George: add up my bill, will you?" He turned to us: "Our Leopold is now writing up his little *informative note.*" (This was the modest official term for a denunciation.)

"You're mad," I said. "I thought he was a good friend."

"He *is* a good friend. He likes us. We interest him. The denouncer always denounces his friends. You wouldn't want him to denounce people he doesn't know?"

And he burst out laughing.

"At least we straightened him out," Tinel Zambilovici said. "And to think that sly dog thought that we were fooling him: after all, I *am* a Cathar! I believe in *agape,* the mystical love that creates the androgyne, the human and divine being, by the fusion of man and woman. Let's not forget that the doctrine made its first appearance in the Danube valley, and that it proceeds from the Gnosis and the Kabbala. Judeo-Wallach as I am by origin, without initiation, I nonetheless aspire to find those Pure Ones who must be hidden somewhere; I know that Tristram and Yseult is a Cathar myth, like the Grail hidden in Monsalvat. Monsieur George: a Fernet-Branca!"

"Well then," asked Arthur Zodie, who wanted an an-

swer to what interested him, "at what date do you expect the end of the world?"

Tinel Zambilovici looked at him fixedly and saw that Arthur didn't seem to be making fun of him. He answered:

"But you've all seen that the climate's changing, there are no real winters any more, just some cold spells in the spring and torrential rains in summer. Children in Japan are born with six fingers to a hand, an arm between their shoulders, two heads, etc. It's the end of the world, this world that is the realm of Ialdabaoth, of the wicked Demiurge, of Satanael. *But when ye shall see the abomination of desolation, standing where it ought not, then let them that are in Judea flee to the mountains: And let him that is on the housetop not go down into the house, neither enter therein, to take anything out of his house: And let him that is in the field not turn back again for to take up his garment. But woe to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter. For in those days shall be affliction, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be . . . For false Christs and false prophets shall rise and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect. . . .*"

There was a silence. Tinel Zambilovici continued, staring at us ironically:

"*And when ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet.* Recognize it? Saint Mark, chapter thirteen. Do you understand? We're the ones who are

in Judea. Judea's here, between the Vistula and the Danube. The Jews have finished their Diaspora. They've rediscovered Canaan and have gone back to it. Now it's our turn to be ignored, despised, tyrannized, to fill the world with exiles: the new Diaspora is ours. It is our turn to be massacred and deported: Jerusalem and the last citadel, Betar, the famished, is Warsaw, Prague, Belgrade, and soon Bucharest or Budapest! It's our turn not to die, the way the Jews didn't die. It's our turn to find and proclaim the great truth that no one wants to believe because it will be found here, between the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Adriatic, in some Tetrarchate of Tito or someone or other. Listen, you two, the Gospel according to Saint John, first chapter, verses forty-five and forty-six: *Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?* Well, out of Bratislava, or out of Craiova, or out of Kecskemét, can there come any good thing? And if we went to preach our as yet unborn God, our future God, not the grim and shabby Baal-Moloch of these poor Russians, to Athens, let's say to Athens, well, what would happen? *For all the Parisians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.* Don't laugh: I'm quoting the Acts of the Apostles. And suppose we speak to these Athenians about the Unknown God—for they were wise enough to build a temple to the Unknown God. What will they do? *And when they heard . . . some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.* That's what I like best about the text—that pure French

politeness. They don't refuse but they say, 'Gladly, some other time!' There'll be nothing to do in Athens, we'll have to go to the great imperial metropolises, to Alexandria, New York, Rome. Monsieur George, a Fernet-Branca! Yes, to Rome. Or to Antioch in Pisidia, or to Des Moines, Iowa, it's all the same. Antioch in Pisidia!"

He was drunk. He was talking with his head bent over, like a poppy-head too heavy for its stem.

"The ax is put to the foot of each tree: *iam enim securis ad radicem arboris posita est. Omnis ergo arbor qui non facit fructum bonum, excidetur et in ignem mittetur.* You, what fruit do you bear?" he asked, suddenly raising his head. Arthur Zodie said:

"None. I'm going *in ignem.* Hee hee hee!"

But he looked alarmed by what he was saying.

"Shit!" Tinel Zambilovici shouted. "What you just said is shit! What about you?"

I shrugged my shoulders. He was furious, and sad too.

"You used to talk about your great project. You've abandoned it!"

"Excidetur! In ignem!" Arthur Zodie howled.

"If at least you'd gone on with it in secret," Tinel Zambilovici continued. I said nothing, paralyzed with fear. This project, which was my life, the core and meaning of my life, would be my ruin.

"In secret, animal!" Tinel Zambilovici continued passionately. "For a thousand years, the initiates have hidden their mystic experience under the code language of alchemy, translating the ecstasy of divine love by the *red lion* or the philosophers' stone, translating the vital force by *archeus* or *athanor,* translating consciousness by mercury, and . . . how about you?"

"In ignem," Arthur Zodie said, "and let's get out of here, they're closing up. It's late."

We sent away the chauffeurs—the poor fellows had fallen asleep—and walked down toward the bank of the Dambovitza, wretched and filthy (what kind of river can flow in Nazareth?)

"How many secret books were lost?" Tinel Zambilovici exclaimed. He had a particular way of walking, holding one elbow in the other hand behind his back. He looked like a half-chicken on a spit. "How many?" he asked. "But the initiates still went on propagating their doctrine. The omnipotence of the State-Church obliges us to resort to secret sects."

"The hell with it," Arthur Zodie said. "The hell with the Soviet Caesaro-Papacy, with the Unknown God, with all of it. We're governed by the Procurator Pontius Pilatovich Pilatov, we're . . ."

"Shut up, animal!" Tinel Zambilovici said, laughing; "shut up, you fool. We're the land of Zebulon, the Land of Nephthali, the Galilee of the nations: the Balkans, *those who live in the obscure vicinities of death, the people found in the shadows."*

"The hell with it . . . I don't care. I'm not afraid of anything," Arthur Zodie said, the cold night air making him completely drunk. "I'm not afraid of anything, you hear me, of anything, except . . . Eeeeeee!" And he emitted a shrill shriek that made me jump.

"Shut up!" I said. "We'll get ourselves arrested!"

He wouldn't stop; the noise was so exasperating that I shouted:

"If you don't stop, I'll kick you outside!"

But we were in the street, and the idea of being kicked

outside made him delirious with laughter; he went on screeching.

"In the outer darkness," Tinel Zambilovici said, smiling pensively. Arthur suddenly felt sick to his stomach and threw up against the nearest wall. I looked up to see what building it was: the Medico-Legal Institute. I said:

"Arthur, you know you've just vomited on the morgue?"

He was so startled that his nausea immediately stopped, and from then on he said nothing, letting us talk, in other words letting Tinel vaticinate and letting me listen to him. Suddenly, somewhere near Strada Vacaresti or the Church of Saint Venus, Arthur gasped and stopped short, his eye fixed on the unglazed *oeil-de-boeuf* of a mansard roof. For a fraction of a second I thought I glimpsed a furtive movement in the darkness there, but I had drunk too much, Arthur's terrible panic was contagious; it must have been an illusion.

"Calm down now, you're scaring us all to death, you fool!" I exclaimed. He was delighted and horrified at the same time.

"I saw him. I swear I saw him! He was watching me! Then he pulled back inside. It was *him!*"

We both chided him furiously. He was screaming:

"It was *him!* The Demiurge! Satanael! Ialdabaoth!"

But seeing our indignation he changed his tone and asked naïvely:

"You think I've had a hallucination?"

"Not even that, you pig!" I said. "You're just making a lot of noise, as usual."

"Night-school demonologist!" Tinel Zambilovici re-

marked scornfully. But suddenly Arthur spoke with a calm that concealed a real tension, a real anguish:

"This time you won't tell me I don't see him."

And there in the distance, at an intersection under a street lamp, passed our friend Leopold whom we had left at home early in the night. We stood motionless and mute until he had vanished.

"It was *him*. It was *him*, I knew it!" Arthur said.

"It's a coincidence, idiot, he has a date!" Tinel Zambilovici exclaimed. Arthur Zodie said:

"Yes, a date. Yes, sure, a date, of course."

Then he was very quiet and subdued until we separated. But Arthur turned up at Tinel's half an hour later, upset, trembling, almost delirious. Apparently he had gone home and climbed his stairs, suffering from a vague but dreadful foreboding. He opened the door, but didn't turn on the hall light; the other door, between the hall and the bedroom, was open and there was a reddish light inside. A fire was burning in the fireplace. Arthur had one big book-lined room, a room big enough to serve, in different corners, as a study, living room, bedroom, and dining room. The living room was a half-circle of armchairs in front of the fireplace. How many times had we drunk and smoked our pipes in those chairs! But that night the chairs were all occupied, and the persons sitting in them turned around to look at Arthur, who came in quaking. These visitors, as many as there were chairs, were each and every one Leopold! Seven or eight identical Leopolds, with the same tender, innocent smile, flickering in the reddish glare from the fireplace. Arthur screamed, slammed the door, and ran out of the house.

Tinel Zambilovici gave him something to drink and

gave him his own bed, where Arthur shivered and refused to go to sleep; he was too frightened, and Tinel had to make conversation with him, sitting on a chair and finally falling off to sleep there. Afterward, he told me:

"He had had a slight fit of delirium. Because otherwise . . ."

"No, it's too silly," I said. "He had had too much to drink. Or he's crazy. After all, we all know Leopold."

"Exactly," Tinel Zambilovici said dubiously.

"Well, then, if he's one of *them* he's a pretty miserable one," I said.

"They're all miserable," Tinel Zambilovici said. "Triumph is denied them."

✳✳✳✳

CHAPTER

8

I

Leopold had begun as an angel, an angel with a broken wing. He and I were both born in the same village, an island among the truck gardens, submerged every Friday by countless oxcarts coming to market. The merchants, the dignitaries, and their wives came to the surface when the peasants had subsided, leaving the streets covered with dung, straw, corn stalks, and human excrement.

On that day, the sick peasants went to the clinic with their carts, their dung, and their straw. In the evenings the director of the clinic played hearts or pinochle with the director of the *lycée* and the director of the branch of the National Bank. He was a handsome, mild man, who died young. His son was our friend Leopold: an attrac-

tive boy with a porcelain face, blue eyes, and long lashes. But he never brushed his teeth, he had the greenest teeth I ever saw. And he limped from birth, poor devil. When he played with us he never walked; he hopped like a bird to conceal his infirmity, so that he wouldn't be humiliated, be made to suffer. Why was he like that? Why did he have to suffer? He had harmed no one. He hadn't even had time. Later he caught up and settled his accounts with the world. But in the presence of God, in Whose eyes there is neither before nor after, is he guilty?

One fine day, Leopold vanished from our little town: arrested, interrogated, cruelly beaten by the Secret Police. He never forgot the heavy breathing of the policemen exhausted from beating his body, the sexual panting of his new tormentors: "Hand me the truncheon, let me take care of it. No, let me do it!" He never forgot the night when he went out into an empty lot, his eyes blindfolded, his arms held by two policemen, one of whom said to the other, "Come on, we won't finish him off, he's too young, it would be a shame." It was an interrogator's trick. But afterward they condemned him to death; he was lucky: the Russians broke through at Jassy. A hero, and an angel. Attractive still, and intelligent. But too intense, never relaxed, always agitated. He was gay, exuberant, insolent: he was conquering life, within a party that was conquering power.

In our cell there was a boy named Uriel Navarra, a brilliant student and a delicate, rather timid soul. I was on duty one night at the headquarters in the Calea Campineano, a filthy house furnished only with benches, chairs, and tables. There were two doors, between which I was sitting, elbows on the table, dozing.

One door opened onto the landing; a boy was stationed at the top of the steps, a tommy gun hanging from his shoulder. The other led to the next room, where Leopold was talking in a low voice with Uriel Navarra; they thought I was asleep.

"Listen, do you like Adele?" Leopold asked.

"Well . . . yes. She's a comrade, isn't she?"

"Yes, of course. But you don't need to hide your feelings from me. We're all comrades, and we owe it to each other. I mean, do you like her sexually?"

There was a silence. Then Uriel murmured in an embarrassed tone:

"Yes, I suppose so. Why not?"

"Why not, of course, that's right. But we have to get the situation straight, don't we? Because she and I have been living together for two months. Sleeping together. So if you want to, we could talk it over, see . . ."

"But I don't want anything," Uriel said. "I didn't know."

"That's what I thought. I don't own her. We're comrades, we like each other. No bourgeois nonsense. We're together, honestly, simply. I thought I should let you know."

"You were right. Thank you," Uriel said.

Years later, I described the scene to Adele, who had just been divorced. She had beautiful burning black eyes and the lilac pallor of her Sephardic Jewish origins. Her eyes grew still wider and her face paler.

"But I never slept with him," she said. "I was a virgin! And Uriel—I was mad for Uriel, but he suddenly became so cold and stopped talking to me. I gave in to Leopold out of spite and despair, because it didn't matter to

me whom I slept with if I couldn't have Uriel . . . Why . . . why . . . it's diabolical, what he did to us!"

She was more frightened than anything else. Not outraged or hurt: frightened. But it was over and done with long ago.

But meanwhile Leopold suffered. He always carried his own private hell with him. I remember visiting him, when I had just met Adele. She gave me one of those penetrating glances with her beautiful eyes. It was an invitation I pretended not to have noticed. But the others? Prospero Dobre was certainly her lover. Tinel Zambilovici too, perhaps, and Felix Fortunesco; I don't think that Arthur quite reached that stage. Leopold sensed something. He provoked us: "Isn't she pretty?" And once when she was lying on a divan naked under her housecoat, he raised the hem to show us her pale, pretty legs. She trembled and covered herself, glancing at him furiously, and then burst out laughing:

"I don't like that kind of joke much . . ."

Once we saw her with dark blotches on her face: he had caught her, beaten her. She didn't come back to the house. Leopold went to her lover's apartment and rang. The man opened the door, looked at him. "Good evening," Leopold said. "Good evening." "Adele is here." "Yes." "I want to see her." "Not tonight. She has all her clothes off and is very tired," the lover said (she married him afterward). Leopold hesitated. He wasn't strong physically. He had risked death, but he wouldn't have dared kill anyone. He said, "Good evening," and began limping down the stairs.

Then there was a cell meeting over the expulsion of Uriel Navarra. No one had the heart to speak against

him. He had asked permission to emigrate to Israel; for that, we had to expel him from the Party. Erasmus Ionesco spoke; he had received orders to cut off a head and had arrived armed with a cleaver. Then it was Isaias Proorocesco's turn. No one asked for the floor: we were too sad. We were going to vote by raised hands, and obviously in unanimity (public voting has no minorities), when Leopold stood up and asked for the floor. He used to be funny; he still was. We knew Uriel wouldn't receive a passport, that he would lose his post, that he was finished. And yet Leopold chastised him and made us laugh at him at the same time. I suddenly stopped and stared with horror at the laughing faces around me. There were only two men who weren't laughing: Uriel, who stared at the speaker with the strange fascination I've seen many victims show toward their accusers. And Leopold, whose innocent, tender smile was infinitely amusing.

Then he went to the Party, that is, to Alfred Anania, to Malvolio Leonte himself; they laughed heartily, promised to speak to Adele's chief, Basil Morcovici, and did nothing of the kind. Leopold remained alone, suffering from carnal frustration, from timidity, from humiliation, from rage.

II

Mademoiselle Buca was a State employee and Leopold's subordinate. She was short, pale, frail, knock-kneed, and stick-legged. She lived at the Bariera Vergo with her mother and brother, in two tiny rooms. In the courtyard, there was a pump and a whitewashed plank hut: the

latrines. The water was frozen in the pump, no one dared use the latrines for fear of freezing; it was terribly cold, the dry cold of the mournful, cruel wind from the Baragan, that makes you remember the vanity and emptiness of life. Mademoiselle Buca looked out the window at the dingy neighborhood, the passing trucks and carts, but she didn't mind all this filth and poverty, for she was born here and in addition she was extremely stupid. Someone came into the little courtyard, walked up the two steps, knocked at the door. Mademoiselle Buca answered it and stood frozen with astonishment: it was the Comrade Director. Her mother, who was leaning against the stove, asked:

"What is it, what's the matter with you?"

"Hello, hello, everyone," Leopold said as he came in and took off his high fur cap. Mademoiselle Buca introduced him to her mother:

"Our Comrade Director . . ." she stammered. Mademoiselle Buca's brother came in from the second room. He had a thick neck and shiny black curls, as black as his pirate's eyes. He barely dipped his head, staring hard at Leopold, who was in a strange state of exaltation, fear, shame, and desperate resolve. He couldn't bear being deprived of a woman any longer. The brothels had been closed and the prostitutes sent to work camps. He had noticed this little employee in his office, had asked for her dossier from the personnel service. She was the most accessible, it had seemed to him, and the most vulnerable. He had circled her like a sparrow hawk around a field mouse. Now he had fallen on her, and accepted the spoonful of jelly and the glass of hot water they offered

him in the Turkish manner still intact among our poorer people. He smiled politely.

"I was just passing," he said, "and I decided it would be pleasant to come and speak to you, Comrade Amelia. May I call you Comrade Amelia?" ("Why not, of course, Comrade Director . . .") "It's about your dossier. Now don't be alarmed." (Mademoiselle Buca had turned white.) "You have enemies, of course. Certain references have been given. But you also have friends. As is proved by the fact that I'm here. Don't be frightened, madame. Your daughter is in good hands. Besides, she's an excellent worker, serious and dedicated, and it would be a shame to let her be persecuted by spiteful gossip."

Madame Buca was horrified: her daughter's little salary kept them alive. The brother stared darkly at the suspicious visitor. Leopold was thrilled: he had let himself go, had taken the plunge. What he was doing was inadmissible, scandalous, absurd, painful. None of the rest of us would have permitted himself such a thing: to visit an employee in order to discuss her dossier. He had discovered a terrible thing that gave him the power to dismiss Mademoiselle Buca: she had Iron Guard brothers, one shot in 1941 after the abortive insurrection, the other imprisoned by the Communists, the third recently out of prison. Leopold looked at this third brother and asked him:

"Have you found a job? Of course, it's difficult, in your case. But don't despair. Would you like to take a little walk, Amelia? May I call you Amelia? Madame, have I your permission to call your daughter by her first name?"

The chamberpot face of Madame Buca and her son's

Fra Diavolo head had both turned to stone. But they had to eat. The mother lowered her eyes and murmured:

"If she doesn't mind . . . I, you know . . ."

Leopold looked at the Calabrian bandit; he too lowered his eyes. They had to eat. Mademoiselle Buca smiled faintly and said:

"It's cold outside . . ."

"That doesn't matter, take your coat, take a warm woolen shawl," Leopold said, standing up and putting on his felt overshoes, his big blue overcoat, and his fur cap. He took Mademoiselle Buca's arm and left with her, a pair of lovers.

But the Buca episode came to a bad end. The family was Iron Guard and bigoted, Mademoiselle Buca was a cold and stupid virgin. Leopold was an atheist Communist, tormented by sexual needs and no longer very attractive. He put up a struggle, but after a month or two of walks and chats and nothing more, Mademoiselle Buca informed him that she would agree to becoming his wife, but absolutely insisted on being married within the church. Leopold, who would have been expelled from the Party for this (and lost his director's post as well), understood and gave up. Afterward he discharged several employees who had Iron Guard relatives or who had been Iron Guardists themselves; Mademoiselle Buca was among them.

Leopold ended by marrying nonetheless—a young girl of the mercantile bourgeoisie whose parents were in despair over the nationalizations, the confiscations, and the cooperatives. This girl dressed in black, or red, or black and red. She had a little faded face, huge empty

black eyes, a tiny faded mouth, a very exposed little bust; she shaved the top of her forehead and part of her neck which, with the tiny sausage curls over her ears, gave her the look of certain Florentine portraits, particularly those of Pisanello, only in sepia. She spent her days in bed reading novels, took innumerable purgatives to lose weight, was cold when Leopold made love to her and terribly bored. Shaved, faded, peculiar, morbid, heavy, dressed in black and red, looking as though she had been recently taken from the coffin or the waxworks, this illustration for *Les Fleurs du Mal* made her appearance at Capsa's or at the Athénée Palace on the arm of her husband Leopold, Marxist-Leninist.

III

But during the thaw, Leopold came to my office one morning and talked about nothing in particular for over an hour. As he was preparing to leave, he told me confidentially, tenderly, after inquiring about my health and my work with great solicitude:

"You know, you'd be doing me a great favor if you could find a place here in your office for an extremely hard-working and serious girl. I'd have taken her on myself, but I have no extra cash in my budget right now. Will you do it for me?"

The next day, he came to introduce her to me: shy, shabby, wide-eyed, twenty years old. I took her on to please my friend Leopold.

A few weeks later, my technical adviser told me:

"Comrade Director, that girl, the new one, has some-

thing wrong with her. People in the office have seen her in the street at six in the morning, with a bloody bump on her head, her hair wild, and covered with mud, like a madwoman. Maybe you could call her in and talk to her. We might be able to help her."

Naturally I called her in; she sat down and stared at me sullenly, defiantly. She was skinny and her clothes looked too big for her.

"Is there anything the matter?" I asked her as gently as I could. "Are you in trouble? I'd like to help you. What's wrong?"

"You're *his* friend?"

"Yes . . . of course I am."

"Congratulations!" she said sarcastically.

"You don't think much of him?"

"He's vile," she said, her voice full of hate. "He crawls. He's like those big white worms that live in rotten wood. Haven't you noticed how fat he's gotten recently? He's twice the size he was, and disgusting-looking, all puffy like that! And I sleep with him," she added in a different tone of voice, looking at Lenin's portrait on the wall over my head.

"She's crazy," I told myself, thinking of my friend Leopold's portable private hell.

"Forgive me for asking this question . . . but why do you live with him if . . ."

"Because I hate him!" she answered, quite unexpectedly. "Because he's better than idiots I know, even so. He might have been an extraordinary man. But he's cowardly, spineless, vile. He doesn't dare divorce his wife. He wants to have an elegant, cultivated wife who speaks French and a mistress at the same time."

This was the only time I ever saw love (she loved him, the poor girl) associated with such physical disgust. Of course, there was nothing I could do for her, but I told her she should speak to me again if she needed help. I didn't see her again for a long time. Yet everyone gradually learned that Leopold, the hero of the underground period, the comrade who was so sympathetic and witty, had a double household. And suddenly the freeze came, and Leopold found his enemies waiting for him, Malvolio's men in general, armed with proletarian morality.

IV

Then came the horrible season of the freeze. The Party meetings I described at the beginning were followed by others, in each of the cells, in each of the Party committees subordinate to Malvolio Leonte. When it was our turn, Leopold telephoned me at eight in the morning.

"Do you have a car? Ours is in the garage being repaired. Can you stop for me?"

He was ready when I reached his house. His wife Beatrice had got up too. She looked cadaverous in a red-lined dress with a lace collar, like a Van Dyck, and a ribbon that looked as if it were made of metal. Her bloodless lips smiled as they would have smiled at me from her own catafalque: the Lady Madeline rising from the crypt of the House of Usher. I chattered about nothing while she looked at herself in a little mirror and didn't answer. Leopold and I left, Leopold getting down the stairs with difficulty, stopping at each landing. He was badly shaven,

as usual, and his teeth were green. He had gained weight, and smoked too much: we had no other pleasures.

"You've been keeping away from everyone lately," he said to me. "We haven't talked for at least a year. You know, I used to love you, the way I love women?"

Embarrassed, I answered with a joke: "In any case, it's not because of my physical appearance . . . now that I'm up to two hundred and twenty pounds . . ."

He wouldn't let me avoid the subject.

"Don't try to get out of it, you know just what I mean. You were fascinating."

"I can't imagine in what way," I said, pulling into my shell.

"You used to look like a man who has a tremendous secret. Or a hidden treasure."

I was alarmed. I said quickly:

"I'm glad you said *used to.* This is no time to have a hidden treasure."

People who hoarded gold were being arrested and condemned to ten or twenty years in prison.

"Have you ever read Ariosto?" Leopold asked.

"No."

"You should, you should. Listen to this:

O quante son incantatrici, o quanti
Incantator tra noi che non si sanno.

That's what you're like: the enchanter who no one knows is one. No, I didn't mean *used to.* Now you've hidden yourself, you have a directorial look, but I know: in secret you're still a sorcerer."

It was typical of him: the pleasure of guessing, of insinuating and inspiring a vague fear, of being faintly dan-

gerous. We reached the sidewalk, climbed into the car. Then he asked me in a wild tone:

"And your collection—how's it going?"

"What collection?" I said, in a voice which I realized sounded quite unreal. "Oh, my project from the old days!" I added quickly. "That was a lot of foolishness. You still remember that?"

"Of course I do! You don't forget things like that. You talked about resisting death, extending the consciousness of humanity in time, combatting oblivion . . . You think a man forgets things like that? I was talking recently with Tinel Zambilovici. He remembers perfectly too."

"Bah!" I said. "The dreams of adolescence . . . It was hopeless." And to the chauffeur: "Faster, comrade, otherwise we'll be late."

"You don't trust me," Leopold said. "After my declaration of love just now! It's not nice, you know."

"But I told you, I gave up any such notions long ago!"

"You mean you haven't gathered anything together? By now, you could have a whole collection of archives."

"I could, but I wouldn't," I answered with a dry smile. "You think this is the time for having such things?"

"No, it would be dangerous. Especially for you, compromised with Diocletian . . . All his people are being kicked out."

"I'm not in with what you call his people. I belong to the Party. Period."

"No need to beat me off with slogans," he said with an insinuating smile.

"I'm not beating you off. I'm expressing my position."

I couldn't accept his hint that I was mouthing slogans

but actually thinking differently. And the chauffeur still hadn't gotten us there!

"Your position," Leopold said, "is a dangerous one. You think Malvolio's forgiven you? You were very clever, the other day. But I'm worried, you know, for your sake. Very worried. Why don't you act better with your chief?"

"Herakles?"

"Yes, of course, Herakles. He's too short, he's always suffered from being almost a dwarf, and you're so tall. He needs to feel his power, and you play the independent. Why? You shouldn't. Make him your friend."

"I can't crawl to him," I said. "I'm polite, disciplined, everything he could ask for."

"It's not enough. It's the wrong strategy. You're forgetting your wife—and his. Zita Nitzelus slept with everyone in Bucharest trying to find someone who could make her happy, and then she resigned herself to making a political career through Herakles. Isolde and you married for love. Don't you see how irritating it is? You have to make up for that."

"Listen," I said. "A millionaire can make up for his millions by giving his money away. All I can get rid of is maybe half an inch, by stooping—which I do."

"You're proud," Leopold said. I said nothing. He went on, with a sweet, innocent smile:

"You could be unfaithful to Isolde. You'd be forgiven a lot for that."

I didn't answer. We had arrived. The comrades were still strolling up and down the courtyard. After getting out of the car, we separated. I went over to Arthur Zodie who, although he was the same height as Herakles Nitzelus, didn't resent my being tall and was, on the con-

trary, extremely friendly. He watched our friend Leopold moving from one group to another, shaking hands and bowing ludicrously, too humbly.

"He's the Devil," Arthur Zodie said. Then his teeth and glasses glittered. "But he's caught his tail in the door! Hee hee! Hasn't he? With his double household, what do you think's going to happen to him? There are so many people whose nerves he's jangled, so many people he's scared to death. Maybe someone wants to give him a good dose of proletarian morality! Even the Devil has his bad moments, when he catches his tail in a knothole! Hee hee hee!"

"Shut up, people are turning around to look at us."

"You're a little scared yourself. You aren't cutting such a grand figure these days, are you?"

And he laughed again, radiant, jovial, delighted—a spectator. *He* wasn't nasty, at least.

Meanwhile Leopold had been taken aside by Zita Nitzelus: Erasmus Ionesco heard the entire dialogue, said nothing, and didn't warn me either (I was marked out for the sacrifice), but reported it to me later, when I returned to favor. Zita was, as usual, too well dressed, wore too much jewelry, and was heavily made up to hide the eczema that disfigured her hawk's face. She wasn't ugly, but she compensated for a sensuality eroticism left unsatisfied by hurling herself on rich, indigestible food that came out in purple blotches under the cosmetics.

"Greetings," she said to Leopold. She couldn't say anything else; a former capitalist, she believed she had to adopt these proletarian manners. "You know, Nitzelus and I would like to see you. You're such a . . . you

know, Herakles thinks you really deserve to be called a Communist, which isn't true of everyone who carries a red card in his pocket. When you look around and see what's going on, it's really scandalous, people who talk about ethics and who—I'm not mentioning any names, it would be a lack of principle to discuss comrades other than in a cell meeting, but I know absolutely revolting cases of adultery, of double households. Of course, the Party knows all about it, and Herakles has his own way of getting information and sending it on: we'll take the appropriate measures when the time comes."

Impassive and silent, Erasmus was enjoying himself enormously. Leopold was smiling faintly and trying to change the subject. Zita did so without being asked:

"But there are other cases, just as disagreeable, too. If you ask me—it's only my opinion, I haven't discussed it with Herakles—but that man over there . . ."

And she indicated me with her eyes: my back was turned. I was chatting with Arthur Zodie.

"You've been his friend for years; there's nothing wrong with that, we like him too, well enough, but not like you; you like him in an *uncritical* fashion. We like him *critically*. What's happening to him? He talks about giving the employees a share in the profits of national enterprises, but that's nothing but demagoguery, it's revisionism! It's counterrevolutionary. I'm right, aren't I? And then, his friendship with Prospero Dobre, who's completely corrupt! You should help your friend; he has very *confused* ideas, to say the least. Comrade Malvolio himself said he was *skeptical* about him recently, and you know what that means."

Leopold, smiling and genial in appearance, was strug-

gling inside like a fish caught in a net. He had to submit to Nitzelus' wishes or vanish into poverty and insignificance. Even putting his emotional life in order wouldn't have saved him, for among us even old faults, forgotten faults, even things that weren't faults when they were committed, are punished. And he needed more sexual activity than the whims of his mad girl afforded him. Yet Beatrice, cold and passive, was an excellent complementary solution—no, he couldn't separate from either one. And Nitzelus could crush him by reproaching him for his recent past. But I was his friend. I had always been his friend, he liked me and he enjoyed friendship, he had been a hero and an angel.

During the discussion, he took the floor and named me:

"The comrade—and everyone knows that we are linked by an old and solid friendship—the comrade needs our help. Through a whole series of circumstances he has manifested a *confused* mentality, related to the *morbid errors* of Diocletian Sava. One of the most obvious proofs of his *ideological confusion* is the comrade's idea—Comrades Zambilovici and Zodie can bear witness to it—the idea of collecting a series of biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs to serve as the secret history of our glorious epoch, where the workers, directed by their *avant-garde,* the Party, lead the people to the construction of socialism and communism. Good in itself, the comrade's idea is stamped with *petit-bourgeois* individualism, an element infiltrated from the enemy ideology. We must help the comrade, whom we all respect, to *liquidate* these *petit-bourgeois* vestiges that are still in his consciousness, so that he can devote his entire strength to the construction

of socialism in our dear fatherland. It is our duty as Communists, our duty as friends and comrades."

He spoke with difficulty, and his body and face twitched, reflecting his inner contortions. I listened and watched him, panic-stricken. It was the worst thing that could happen to me at this moment: that someone should publicly refer to my project, which I hadn't breathed a word about in over ten years since I had committed the unforgivable offense of mentioning it—but I was twenty at the time, and I knew nothing; none of us knew anything in those days.

Herakles Nitzelus, yellow and wrinkled as a Mongol dwarf at the court of Genghis Khan, consulted his neighbors at the speaker's table and then stood up:

"The comrade has shown us, I think, the way in which our discussion should proceed. Frank, courageous criticism which calls things by their names, that is what this comrade has given us, and in the name of the Committee I thank and congratulate him. In my opinion, the other speakers should follow his example. And the comrade whom the last speaker has named should abstain from easy demagogic effects, like those of the conclusion of his speech during the other day's meeting, a speech which, I may add in parenthesis, affected the comrades of the Party leadership who were present at the discussion most disagreeably. The comrade should instead analyze his *errors* seriously, profoundly, and in a true self-critical spirit."

I was no longer listening; I was thinking hard. This was serious. I wasn't expecting words like *errors*. Was what Leopold had told me true? I would have to try to

neutralize the threat: perhaps things weren't going so badly, perhaps Herakles Nitzelus was the only one who had a grudge against me, perhaps Malvolio didn't even know who I was. But what had made Leopold mention my project in public? It was only long afterward that I learned of his conversation with Zita Nitzelus. At the first pause I stood up and made for the door. No one spoke to me. Zita was there, watching everything, and they were afraid to annoy her—but I still didn't realize that. Suddenly Leopold was beside me. He murmured:

"Are you angry?"

"Angry? Why?"

"I just wanted to know."

"Do I have any reason to be angry with you?"

"You're angry, I can tell. But you're wrong, believe me. You'll understand later on: I've just done you the greatest service I could. I've given you the opportunity to clear up this question and to settle things once and for all. I've kept others from using this question, and they wouldn't have asked it in such a friendly way. Believe me, I'm still your friend; of all the people here, I'm the only one who likes you enough to talk to you. Look around and you'll see."

"Yes, it's true, you're right."

"Besides, I didn't attack you. Other people would have attacked you. At least I spared you as much as I could . . ."

"And now you think the others won't attack me?"

"No, they have nothing to add, they have no more arguments," he said.

But I knew they would attack me anyway, and I knew who would do it. I said:

"Yes, let me think now, I'm going to have to take the floor."

"Just tell me you're not angry," Leopold said humbly, tenderly. He had done the worst thing he could to me at that moment, and he knew it.

"No, I told you I wasn't angry, not at all."

He left me, gratified, and limped away. Poor fallen angel.

Afterward, he was promoted, sent on official delegations to the West, decorated. When we met, we were careful to talk about things that had nothing to do with either of us. They say that the souls of the dead try to make the living hear them and cannot succeed. I don't know. The living call to the dead too, and never get any answer. That was the way Leopold and I talked, afterward.

✳✳✳✳

CHAPTER

9

I

That was how the crisis in my own affairs had begun. Now I have to explain how the only neutral power to which I might have appealed became opposed to me, and how I was crushed by the expanding ice fields. In the "sector" where I played a modest part, the supreme authority belonged to Malvolio Leonte; the immediate danger—my direct superior—was the Tartar dwarf Herakles Nitzelus; between them, in a manner of speaking, was Basil Morcovici, and I had him against me when he might have been the only one who could have protected me. To explain matters, I must describe the role played by Valentine Ionesco. The thaw had also been a liberation of Eros. It

was during the thaw that the Paciureas divorced in order to marry each other; as had Isolde and I, and others whom I shall not mention. It was during the thaw that Leopold and others took mistresses. A whole generation was seeking erotic fulfillment; petty officials were discharged because they were making their secretaries sleep with them; high officials repudiated their middle-aged, doctrinaire wives and replaced these ancient conspiratresses with pretty and quite apolitical young ladies. My friend Tinel Zambilovici even tried to have a grand passion, to be Tristram.

"Do you know what Aristophanes says in the *Symposium?*" Tinel asked me. We were in the bar of the Athénée Palace. The big bay windows were wide open. On the square, we watched people pass by, wearing coats that were badly cut and too long, badly shaved, unwashed, the women covered with shawls. The bright-colored creatures of the thaw, elegant girls in high-heeled shoes, brown young sportsmen ready to furnish all Europe with males, were greeted with mumbled or even audible curses: they were detested, for we were too poor, too enraged by misery to endure beauty. The bar was still empty. Alone in a corner, a wrinkled, graying poet with rumpled clothes was watching people walk by and letting his coffee grow cold. He was a great poet, in this unknown country of unknown great poets. Nothing of his was being published because he wasn't writing poems of propaganda and action. He had empty blue eyes and he stared at the empty blue sky above the big white palace of the Central Committee.

"According to Aristophanes in the *Symposium,*" Tinel

Zambilovici continued, "the human being was originally created in two halves that were later separated and which now wander through the world seeking each other. Now —Monsieur George! A Fernet-Branca. And a beer for the comrade—now listen to my commentary: this is a dialectical, even a Marxist conception, in essence. Don't laugh, idiot. First we have Paradise (unity, perfection, innocence, right?), the Fall (the divided consciousness, you follow me?), Salvation, and the New Jerusalem. Fine. Now the Marxist and Russian version: the primitive commune, the class society and history, and the communist society of the future. Do you see? And of course, Aristophanes' mythical androgyne, the man and woman separated, then their reunion in the perfect couple that transcends them each by love, by *agape,* and reconstitutes the mystical androgyne. In a word, the return to the primordial unity whose loss we have suffered."

Tinel Zambilovici had drunk a great deal. He confided in me:

"And I've found it, do you understand, I've found my missing half, what the Spanish call *mi otra media naranja,* the other half of the orange. I'm wild over her. I take cantharides, drugs, testoviron, stimulants. I have a Candaules complex. I'd like to show her naked to all of you. And to possess her before you, the way Absalom did with David's concubines—on the palace roof!"

And he stared at me, grinning like Mephistopheles. Then his mood changed and he grew melancholy.

"And then I go home and I look into the round, empty eyes of my poor wife, and I see the nothingness, the stupid desert, and I feel like going out and hanging

myself! Why is this happening to me? I was a child, I wasn't twenty yet—less, do you hear? I slept with her and she got pregnant, like a fool—unless she had the enormous prehistoric guile of those poor creatures who want to propagate the species the way the salmon wants to swim upstream, but let's be gallant, let's say it was only stupidity, although in our age—this was in 1943—even a girl of eight isn't allowed to be ignorant of such matters, and as for parents? No, they let her go through with it to trap me, they probably decided, 'Fine, we'll marry the goose off,' because she's really a goose, you have to see her, she has round, stupid, watchful eyes that are always looking for something to peck at—it's frightening! And that's what's breaking my heart. I'm finished: wife, child, nothing's left, no way out—maybe I could kill them?"

He sat there brooding, a Martian with an oversized, melancholy head.

"But maybe there'll be a war. *Götterdämmerung*. Hydrogen, Napalm, the works. Hell painted by Hieronymus Bosch: red flames here and there, in the shadows. Napalm."

Then he had more to drink and there was no sequence in what he was saying. I wondered who the second half of the orange was. Then I saw them together one day. Meanwhile, everyone else had already found out. It was Valentine. The beautiful, capricious Valentine Ionesco. She was Erasmus' sister, but he never saw her: she compromised him. I had paid my court to Valentine in 1944 or '45, but I was too young for her. At twenty she preferred only rich forty-year-olds or fifty-year-olds. Then

the rich forty- and fifty-year-olds fled the country or were jailed or shot or sent to work camps. She married a nobody—Kiki Zandbanc, who had a big cock.

II

I saw the three of them together—Valentine, Kiki Zandbanc, and Tinel Zambilovici—during the summer, at the seashore. It was at Constanza, on the Three Slippers Beach. The sea was high and violet. To the right, the eroded yellow loess cliff with its ruined houses. To the left, more cliff, powdery bushes, beaches rimmed with rotting seaweed that smelled of iodine. Above, the observation towers of the coast guard. People had tried to swim out to foreign freighters. Of course, they had been killed in time by rifle shots, before they could cause international complications. Patrol boats were floating a few yards offshore, and stopped any swimmer who tried to get past them. The end of the little jetty was bristling with lines: people were fishing for scorpaenas. Carrion was rotting in the acanthus and asphodel; bees sucked up the honey from the fierce thistles of the Dobrudja. The Black Sea. The white sun. A 1925 destroyer lay on the horizon. A Soviet tanker was coming in to take on Rumanian oil, gratis. From time to time, a vague, velvety thunder rolled across the water: the destroyer was testing its guns against the Western imperialist aggressor. On his observation tower, a coastguardsman, his field glasses glued to his eyes, was studying the "meat

box," the plank-walled solarium for women where rheumatic flesh and spread legs offered themselves to the sun. Between the tower and the solarium, waist-deep in the asphodels, his eyes fixed on the swarm of ripe nakedness, a little gypsy was masturbating desperately. We were lying on the sand. I looked at the sun between my eyelashes: a core of burning brilliance and long rays of fire. I received the day through my closed eyelids: orange-red, a carnal and voluptuous color, suffused with light. Isolde was lying beside me. Tinel Zambilovici, skinny and sunburnt, looked like a Mephisto who had become a disciple of Gandhi. Valentine was there too, tanned, with the body of a goddess, and so was her so-called husband Kiki, and Prospero Dobre in a beach robe and straw hat, smoking a pipe and green from having smoked too much, and Arthur Zodie, pink and paunchy as a newborn piglet. Some short-legged Stakhanovites, huge women from Costanza in shifts or shirts that revealed their enormous white thighs and their tanned calves, mobs of howling children, girls in bikinis, young professors of Marxism-Leninism with protruding bellies and skinny legs swarmed all over the beach. A girl came toward us. She was eighteen or twenty, wasp-waisted with enormous hips, like a statue by Medrea; bronzed by the sun, and with green eyes. She seemed to know my friends. She spoke to them gaily:

"How are you? My god, Kiki, how dark you are! Going in for nudism?"

"Yes, of course," Kiki Zandbanc answered. "I'm brown all over."

"Show her, Kiki," Valentine said, laughing. (I never

knew a woman whose laugh was as pleasant to hear as Valentine's.) "Show her, but go off somewhere else."

"You're crabby this morning, Valentine," the girl said. Valentine answered:

"No, I'm not. I'm friendly. I'm sparing you the preliminaries, helping you get right down to what you want. That *was* what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"You judge people by yourself!" the girl said, furious. Valentine smiled:

"No, don't be silly. I was merely drawing my conclusion from what everyone in Bucharest says about you, darling."

Her eyes wet, the girl turned away and stalked off. We all laughed.

"What a bitch you are," Prospero Dobre said.

"No, I'm not, I'm just protecting the men who belong to me. All except this couple. Cover up, you two, you're going to get a burn."

Arthur Zodie covered us with a big square of white linen. I turned my head and looked at Isolde. She was spattered with freckles. Amber eyes and reddish hair, the ambiguous smile of an archaic Artemis, the sharp features and the athletic body of a boy. I like big white arms and blond hair, or olive skin and blue-black hair. But with Isolde, I've never known why, there was something unknowable about her that made me fit her, like a coin broken in two: *media naranja.* Between my shoulder and hers the stifling air should have sputtered with electric sparks. We weren't touching each other.

"You remember?" Isolde whispered, smiling.

Yes, I remembered, it had begun right here, we had

gone down to swim at the end of the jetty. There, sitting on a block of concrete that the shock of the waves stirred from time to time, she had leaned against my shoulder, her body strong and hot. I hadn't even known how I leaned over her mouth and kissed her. Her lips were dry and salty, but there was a tender, melting, cool taste on the tip of her tongue. I died for a second then. That was how it had begun.

"Yes, I remember. The concrete block."

We don't kiss in public; proletarian morality is opposed to it. We were surrounded by fishermen, but, oddly enough, no one had paid any attention to us. We had both gone crazy, we had divorced, and now we were together.

Isolde whispered:

"Did you know I was pregnant?"

I looked at the sun through the white linen: needles of light, brighter toward the center. I whispered:

"Good. I'm glad."

She had wanted to have a child for so many years. The doctors had told her she wouldn't have many chances. I held out a hand and touched hers, which was long and beautiful, covered with freckles. I didn't tell her I was anticipating disaster, poverty, even prison. There wouldn't be many chances. She had to have this child. We'd see about what happened afterwards. If only it was a girl, tall and slender, an ephebe, I thought; but Tinel Zambilovici's words interrupted me.

"Under that sheet, they look like sepulchral effigies. But the only statues for a couple's grave are the ones on the tomb of Alcobaça. You don't know where it is. In Alco-

baça, in Portugal, in the abbey church of Nostra Senhora da Batalha, is the tomb of the king Dom Pedro and his wife Inez de Castro. Inez was killed by order of the old king, Dom Pedro's father. The son waited for his father's death, mounted the throne, and with his own hand stabbed the councilors who had killed Inez. Then he had the whole court file before the king and the queen for the ceremony of homage. He had had his wife disinterred, and the courtiers kissed the hand of Inez de Castro's skeleton. When he died, Dom Pedro was buried with Inez, according to his orders, sole to sole."

"But why?" Valentine asked.

"Because at the Last Judgment, when the dead have risen, he wanted Inez to be the first he saw. And to be the first she saw."

There was a silence. Isolde said:

"It's too bad we don't believe in the resurrection any more."

"But," Tinel Zambilovici said, "at least we can try to meet here on earth, before the Last Judgment. Isn't that right, Valentine?"

"Yes," she said, "a meeting on Judgment Day sounds too far away."

"Judgment Day is now," Prospero Dobre said. "Civilizations are born in an atmosphere of disaster, the end of the world, or at least the *expectation* of the end of the world. Or of history. Or of the class society."

"Do you think that the Devil will outlive the class society?" Arthur Zodie asked.

They argued on this point for some time. Valentine laughed; she had a charming, very musical laugh. Kiki Zandbanc said nothing: he didn't believe in anything.

Isolde and I looked at each other under that linen sheet and smiled.

III

My friend Tinel Zambilovici thought he had found the half of himself missing since Paradise. Valentine thought so herself for a moment, thought Tinel was her great love. The formal declaration was made in the little apartment she shared with Kiki Zandbanc. I was their witness. Kiki was sitting on the arm of a chair, Valentine on the big studio couch, her head bent, staring at her perfect brown hands lying one on top of the other. Tinel Zambilovici, standing, was holding his right arm behind his back, his right hand grasping his left elbow. He explained:

"I want you to understand this, Kiki. You're a Kiki with a big cock. That's all. You're a male. Valentine liked you, she still does, I don't doubt it for a minute. But I'm her half, do you understand? And she's mine. It has nothing to do with the sexual act. She's had adventures, affairs, before you; I hope you don't have any illusions about that. But such chance encounters have nothing to do with this thirst, do you understand, the kind of longing we feel for each other, this desire I could call abstract, complete. It's carnal too, of course, but it also makes us capable of holding hands, lying side by side, naked, in the same bed, without doing anything, do you understand? Motionless! You have to admit that doesn't mean anything to you, does it? You'd think it was ridiculous. And it might be, I'll admit. But with the sister-soul

you've lost long since, during the expulsion from Paradise, it wouldn't be so ridiculous, would it?"

He had ended on a note of a gentle gravity. Kiki Zandbanc shrugged his shoulders and said:

"I understand. . . . Between the two of you there's something beautiful . . . a great love. . . . Naturally that hurts me, and you couldn't care less, but I'm not complaining, it's natural. Be happy together, and excuse me, I have to go, I can't bear to look at you."

And he went away. He went to Arthur Zodie for a night's asylum. Before going to sleep, he asked Arthur, who knew everything:

"Listen, who won the soccer game? The Bulgarians or us?"

"The Bulgarians, two to nothing," Arthur said, startled.

"Funny," Kiki Zandbanc said. "I thought we had it."

Then he turned over and went to sleep.

Arthur told me the story, and we both decided that Kiki was an absolute imbecile. But we soon found out that he was the only smart one of us all, and particularly the only smart man among Valentine's lovers, past, present, and future.

Once, in fact, when I was going to see Tinel, I heard shouting, the sound of dishes breaking, furniture overturned. The shouts suddenly broke off. Through the door Tinel asked who it was.

"It's me," I said. He opened the door. One of his cheeks was covered with blood, he had a blue lump on his temple and scratches on his jaw. He was pale, trembling. I walked in. The room was in chaos, a chair was knocked over, vases and glasses in fragments on the

floor. Valentine was disheveled, but calmer than Tinel. He closed the door and screamed:

"I'll kill you, you beast!"

Valentine said:

"Calm down, you idiot, or I'll give you one with this ash tray that will send you to the cemetery!"

Tinel turned to me and said in a pathetic voice:

"What can I do with this creature? What have I ever done to her? She's torturing me! She loathes me! My other half—pouah!"

He began whimpering:

"She sleeps with the tax collector! And with the man who collects for the radio!"

Valentine laughed, but she looked dangerous.

"You're a nice boy," she said, "but not much good in bed. Now clear out of here, go back to your wife, and quick, or I'll kill you, you idiot!"

And to me:

"He has the DT's, he drinks too much, he takes drugs so he can be a devil in bed, and it's too much for him. He was trying to strangle me just now!"

She began laughing again:

"Take him back to his wife. I've had enough of him. Tristram! What a lot of crap. Go on, get out of here, both of you!"

I took Tinel Zambilovici by the arm and led him away.

"Come on, my friend, she's upset now, you have to get some rest."

He let himself be led out. I smiled at Valentine and closed the door behind us. Out in the street, Tinel shook off my hand:

"Don't hold onto me. I may have been drinking, but I'm not drunk. Let me alone. I want to die in peace."

And he walked off, his head bent. He was holding his left elbow in his right hand behind his back, which, as I have said, made him look like a half-chicken on a spit.

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CHAPTER

10

I

Soon after, two events occurred which I learned about much later and which perhaps explain all of Valentine's subsequent actions. The first was the visit she made to Erasmus, her brother. Erasmus' secretary came in one morning and announced to her chief with a sympathetic smile:

"Your sister is waiting outside."

For a long time, Erasmus had trained himself to show nothing. He couldn't send his sister away without a scandal; people of his kind have to be like Caesar's wife. He decided to receive her in a manner that would discourage her from ever coming back. Valentine came in, smiling, charming; her black curls shone with blue high-

lights, her eyes were soft, black, and caressing, her voluptuous mouth painted and smiling. She was quite tall, with a superb figure. She confined herself to the elegance we tolerated in our country: a pullover, a cardigan, and a skirt, no gloves, her nails shiny with clear polish.

"Excuse me for coming without an appointment," she said, "but I knew you wouldn't have received me."

"I'm not here to chat with my family," Erasmus said coldly. He knew his sister. He found her changed, her face strained, a hard line around the corners of her mouth. She was over thirty.

"At least you won't refuse to give me some advice," Valentine said. "I've wasted my time. I thought *these people* would be leaving."

"You mean the Party?"

The whole country called them *these people:* it was the mark that distinguished the miscreants from the elect. The elect said *we.*

"Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that. Now I'm convinced there won't be any change. I should work. Could you get me a job?"

"No," Erasmus said. "And if you use me as a recommendation, and if any personnel department comes to me for a reference, I'll make sure you get refused."

"Don't worry," Valentine said. "I won't compromise you. But at least give me some advice! Where could I work?"

"You're too beautiful," Erasmus said. "There's nothing you can do. Even if you slept with someone influential, the man wouldn't dare protect you against any shrew in the personnel department. No, there's nothing I can do."

She looked at him and said:

"You've changed a lot."

"Yes, physically, I know. I'm bald. You're beginning to change too, physically."

"You wouldn't have any opera or theater tickets to give me?"

"Why?"

"I'm broke. I feel like going."

"And getting yourself seen?" Erasmus said with a sneer. "All right, I'll have some sent to your place now and then."

"Thank you, little brother."

"It's nothing, nothing at all." He stood up and walked her to the door with a coldly official politeness. "And you must not come here again; it would make me guilty of *familiarism.*"

This barbarism, of Soviet origin, had come into the language two or three years ago. Valentine was hearing it for the first time; she nevertheless understood and reassured her brother. She came out into the street where the long black limousines were waiting for the comrades with their heavy burdens of responsibility. "What should I do?" she was saying to herself. "What will become of me?" Tinel Zambilovici was crazy and poor. There were no more rich people. The people who had stolen more than a hundred thousand lei from the State had been condemned to death: it was the death-penalty limit, and it wasn't much of one. This visit had stirred her profoundly. She hadn't seen Erasmus for a long time, and he had frightened her; she thought he looked old at thirty-five, cold, nasty, and then that morbid pallor, that pale smooth skull . . .

"Poor old Erasmus," she murmured, crossing the Calea Victoriei. Then she thought of herself, the poverty that was lying in wait for her. Poverty? Maybe even hunger. Hunger was never far off. She went back to her apartment in Strada Stirbey-Voda. Everything was dirty and rickety; on the walls lighter rectangles memorialized the pictures she had sold. The kitchenette was full of garbage and dirty dishes. Valentine didn't eat. She sat doing nothing for hours at a time. She had begun to be afraid several months before. Now she wondered if there were really any way out, if it wasn't absurd to go on hoping. No, she wouldn't escape poverty, hunger, disease, or marriage with a man she wouldn't like, whom she might even detest. She looked at herself from time to time in a mirror. Not Valentine! Her beauty was so exceptional! You didn't let such a woman die of hunger. Yes, that's just what you did. Things much more surprising than that had happened, things much, much more . . .

At eight, a friend telephoned asking her to join her and a friend for dinner at State Cafeteria Number 8. She had a strange insistence in her voice. Valentine went, without bothering to change her clothes. The big restaurants were empty because no one dared expose himself to the reports of secret agents: where did one get money to eat out? Surely not from sources compatible with proletarian morality. But the State Cafeterias were jammed, as was Number 8. Men in overcoats were arguing intensely, elbows on the table, huge circles under their eyes; the place smelled of spilled wine, stale beer, bad tobacco. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and kitchen smells. It was cold. The conversations were loud. The men were badly shaved, their hair was long and un-

combed, their clothes were worn, and their faces were dim and gray, or sweaty and red. The friend of Valentine's friend belonged to the second category: purple, a two days' beard, heavy brows, a powerful physique in a leather jacket, and huge boots. He kissed Valentine's hand like a boyar, but didn't remove his cap. He called a waiter:

"Hey, you! Don't you see me? Bring us the menu, I want to see these girls lick their fingers. A reward if you do it fast!"

And he rubbed his thumb and index finger together under the waiter's nose. The latter's face lit up: he had understood, he would earn a big tip. But his smile was pale and dubious: since the Revolution and poverty and the new men, the old Rumanian generosity and the tips *à la boyarde* had vanished.

"There, my girl," Valentine's friend's friend said, pouring out the wine (he spattered the table that was already marked with wet circles). "You have to live. There's no way of putting anything aside for old age nowadays. They slap a monetary reform on you and bang! All your savings confiscated. You can use your banknotes for toilet paper. Gold's better; but not coined, or you're in for twenty years. Bracelets. Things. But when it comes time to sell them, you lose fifty percent. So? So, you have to find a man, I mean a real man, the kind who can make money out of anything. But men like that are too sly, they don't get married!"

And he burst out laughing, pounding his knees. He had huge, fleshy hands. He kept looking at Valentine and her friend, one after the other, and roaring with laughter.

"Have to be on the lookout," he continued. "Take me, for instance. At our factory, if I hadn't known what to say to the people's attorney, then what? But I told him that the materials in question had been registered and put in the storeroom by a man who had died in the meantime. If I hadn't thought of that, we'd all have been done for. . . . You have to know how to leave a little door open behind you. Or know the attorney's relatives—brother, father-in-law, uncle—who can talk to him or are in partnership with him. But you girls don't know anything, you have to learn what life's like from me!"

He was delighted with himself, cocksure, masterful: a man perfectly adapted to the new world, and one who would have survived just as well in the old. The waiter arrived with greasy forks and knives of some gray metal and the stiff, dry schnitzels, the brains *vinaigrette,* the pimentos, and some wet glasses. Valentine couldn't manage to drink. When the man went to the lavatory, she said to her friend:

"Listen, why did you want me to come too? You seem to be getting on very well together. What does he do?"

"I don't know," the friend said. She was heavily made up. She had been a parachutist during the war. "I don't know. He works for a factory. A man stopped in a while ago and all they talked about was trucks, deliveries, how should I know? He's high as a kite . . ."

"But what do you need me for?"

The other girl laughed nervously.

"He scares me. He'll come and sleep in my house, but I don't want to be alone with him."

"Why?"

"He's . . . don't you see what he's like? I've never had anything to do with people like him before. They're so brutal, so coarse, they're like Russians. You never know . . ."

"No, what could he do to you? He'll sleep with you, that's all," Valentine murmured.

"No, that's just it, it's not all," the other woman said reluctantly. "You know what he was saying, before you came? 'I'm going to fuck the living daylights out of you tonight, until your bones go soft. That's what I like,' he said, 'fucking and then a little roughhouse, fucking and beating you up a little!' "

There was a moment's silence. The waiters circulated with clusters of beers over the hats, caps, and fur caps.

"And if there are two of us, you think there'll be less roughhouse?" Valentine asked. "We'll share the beating-up and there'll be less for each of us?"

"No, that's not it," her friend said, hesitating. "But you know, if there are two of us, maybe that'll keep him from having ideas that might be more . . . more extraordinary."

"More extraordinary than beating us up? Just what does that mean? Killing us?"

Valentine's friend laughed weakly and stared at her. The man returned at that moment and sat down between them.

"There, that feels better. And now we'll have our little wedding party! And then we'll go and get married, all three of us, what do you say?"

And he began to laugh, staring hard at them. He was probably a peasant's son; his father had known only one

pleasure: beating his wife and children. Or going out into the stable and beating a horse or a cow until it fell down half dead. Valentine said:

"Wait for me a minute, I'll be right back."

She left the cafeteria, almost running. The Boulevard Bratiano was empty. And it was getting dark. She felt alone, unarmed, in danger. The police wouldn't have protected her: they were there to protect the State, not her, and they belonged to the same breed as her friend's friend. She was very frightened. This new world was empty, dangerous, incomprehensible. She was walking very quickly, almost running, and moaning faintly like a little frightened animal.

Around the same period, something happened to Isolde and me that was a very bad sign. It was during a dinner with my chief, Herakles Nitzelus. He had also invited Leopold and his wife Beatrice. I was quite surprised to be entertained by this dangerous dwarf, but I had no way of getting out of it. The Nitzeluses had a four-room house adjoining that of a vice-minister's. Inside, paintings, silver, porcelains, old furniture: the spoils of the boyars whose luxury had discreetly flowed into the apartments of the new class. The wine was really remarkable. Herakles Nitzelus remained at the table with us while Zita, who had a fresh eruption on her face, took my wife aside.

"My dear," she said, "we live very simply. Don't forget that *we* are peasants' children."

(Herakles, as a matter of fact, was just that; she herself was the daughter of an important shopkeeper on the Calea Victoriei.)

She took an American cigarette out of her pocket. She never showed the pack: they were imperialist, odious cigarettes. She always took them out one at a time, to keep from showing that they were Chesterfields.

"When I need something," she continued, "I send the chauffeur to the co-op store of the Ministerial Council, or to the co-op of the Central Committee. They have really excellent things, you know, for very, very good prices. I'm telling you this only to explain that you can live very nicely without going out dancing and carrying on in restaurants the way the two of you do. Do you suppose people don't know about it? My husband knows everything, absolutely everything: whom you've eaten dinner with, where you've been, what you talked about, everything, the next morning. Your husband doesn't want to take our advice, you know. He's so stubborn. And under that calm, dignified, easygoing manner of his, there's something he's not telling anyone . . . perhaps not even you."

"He's devoted to the Party," Isolde said quickly.

"I know, I know, no one's doubting his loyalty. We have confidence in him. Particularly since he's with you, you have such a splendid underground record. Apropos: you were a cell secretary; why did you retire? You aren't working any more. You seem discouraged, disillusioned —well, you certainly aren't what you used to be fifteen years ago, when you risked your life in the Palace Square."

Isolde had had too much experience not to see the danger: people had sensed that she was withdrawing. She would have to answer with a well-chosen slogan.

"But I do work in a neighborhood cell. I'm responsible for the wall newspaper. *You mustn't underestimate neighborhood work.*"

Zita Nitzelus smiled wryly:

"And you go there dressed that way? Elegant like that? Those are bourgeois leftovers, my dear. Come, I'll show you. I want you to understand."

And she dragged Isolde upstairs to her bedroom, and opened her packed closets.

"You see? I have at least two dozen dresses made a year. But I only wear them to official parties, to diplomatic cocktail parties, or in the house; outside of those places, no one ever sees me dressed except as an ordinary comrade. You're foolish about it, you two. You have much less than we do, but you expose it. That's not smart. After all, you have to think of the people, comrade, of our magnificent people who haven't the advantages we do. It's a political question. You're growing more and more bourgeois, you two. Why did you buy a car when you had the one from the office?"

"It was very cheap, and on installment."

"But who has his own car? And why? You have the other one! I suspect you don't want to understand. Well, it's a piece of advice from me, the last one I'll be giving you," Zita Nitzelus said, and she began shutting her closets.

Downstairs, however, her husband had drunk too much. He was shouting, staring at me fixedly:

"Some people talk about de-Stalinization! They don't like Stalin! But do you like the Soviet tanks? They'll soon make you pull back into your shells, whoever you are. Oh, I know you little prigs who pretend to be so

devoted but who are really enemies of the Party, bandits, agents of imperialism who have infiltrated among us! We showed them in Budapest what was waiting for them, and if we have to, we'll show them here, too!"

I wasn't an agent of imperialism; I hadn't taken the side of the Hungarian rebels. I was guilty only of reticence, of dignity—insofar as they were possible in such a place, at such a time—so that I wanted to throw my glass of wine in his face. He made too many faces and looked at me too hard as he screamed. But he was my chief and I was his guest. I confined myself to saying:

"Listen, there are people who are overzealous so their past will be forgotten, people who've been expelled from the Party and let back in for their servility. Even their wives have been brought into the Party through the back door, without a cell meeting, haven't they? And they're not accused of being imperialist agents who have crept into the Party, are they? So what's the use of getting all excited?"

I was referring to Herakles and to his wife: he had been a member of a Fascist, ultra-nationalist organization. He didn't seem to understand, but he stopped vituperating. Isolde came down with Zita, and a few minutes later we said good-by, leaving the Nitzeluses with Leopold and his wife, who had said nothing since the beginning of the evening.

II

We said nothing for a long time. Then I asked Isolde to park the car near the entrance to the J. V. Stalin Park of

Rest and Culture. From here, we took a long walk across the empty park that was haunted only by pairs of policemen. In the distance, the Polygraphic Combinat was lit up, a cut-rate Kremlin.

"It was a last offer of capitulation," I said.

"But why didn't you make peace with him?" Isolde asked.

"I didn't feel like humbling myself. I won't ever talk to him again except for departmental questions, and then only if I absolutely have to."

"Actually, it's hard to figure out what they want. It's some form of very obvious submission, something very showy and crude."

"That's right, and I don't want to go through it."

"But you're in danger," Isolde said. "Don't forget."

"I'm not forgetting, but I want to see how far they can go. I haven't done anything wrong. I've served the Party and the State. What can they do to me?"

"What would happen," Isolde asked, "if you handed over your documents to the Institute of Party History? Not all of them: just the ones that are harmless. Saying that was all there were."

"They wouldn't believe me. I've already thought of all the possible solutions. I even thought of leaving my archives to the Academy library, under seals, to be opened a hundred years after my death. The Duc de Saint-Simon did that, for his *Mémoires*. I don't want to attack anyone. I don't want to do anyone any harm. I only want to prolong all our lives, widen our consciousness beyond our limits in time. I want to drive back death. Our lives, all our lives, cry out in me. They shout an order: *Con-*

tinue me! Prolong me! That's my mission. It's what I have to do as long as I'm alive."

Isolde said nothing. We were walking through the rose garden. No more roses: it was too late in the year. The fountains were turned off. There was an odor of dust in the air: a drouth on the Baragan. Isolde murmured:

"Yes, but the Party line changes. And then the whole image of the past changes, according to the new line. That's why they don't dare write their *Mémoires:* a frozen, fixed past isn't what they want. And they've all done things they'd rather forget, things for which they could be attacked. They don't like the truth. They're afraid of it. They touch it up from a revolutionary, critical point of view, from working-class positions, but the simple truth, you know . . ."

"I know. Now I have to hide my archives even better. Luckily I've transcribed everything in tiny handwriting, and put some parts into code. It's an agony to write in code, and sometimes I have a hysterical fear I won't be able to decode it!"

I burst out laughing, and Isolde joined in: we laughed until the tears came, in the deserted park at midnight. In the distance, at the end of the rose garden, two policemen watched us suspiciously. The stars were twinkling in Lake Herastrau; on the island in the middle of the lake, the tall poplars were black.

"Besides, I think my handwriting is getting so tiny because I'm scared," I went on, still laughing. Isolde took my hand and kissed it.

"Poor darling. But don't let them worry you. Give me the archives, I know more about conspiracies than

you, I'll find a hiding place for them. I'll take care of everything."

She had spoken in that virile tone of voice that was so becoming to her, her face clear and ambiguous, like an archaic ephebe. At eighteen, she had specialized in smuggling Communists and Jews across the frontier, away from deportation and the gas chamber. Now I was the one who kissed her long beautiful hand. Holding hands, we left the park and walked back to the car. Under the lindens of the Avenue Kisseleff, I glimpsed two figures I thought I knew. One was my friend Nathanael Ciorap, tall, slender, slightly disjointed, and the other was Valentine, looking like Venus herself, a *café-au-lait* marble Venus. The same blue-black hair, the same huge innocent eyes, the same perfect, sensual mouth, the bold, playful expression, the warm-hearted whore, the devil in the flesh, and, as we say among our people, washed in every water, sifted through every sieve, witch and sorceress.

"I'd like you to meet my future wife. Except for Leopold, you're the first to hear: I'm divorcing and marrying Valentine," Nathanael said.

Valentine added:

"I'm glad to see you. What a handsome couple the two of you make. Like stud animals."

And she burst out laughing. Flattered, I glanced at Isolde to see if she enjoyed the comparison. But she was laughing too: it was difficult to resist Valentine's gaiety. The four of us walked a ways together, we men lagging behind. Nathanael told me how he and Valentine had met, how the affair had begun.

"My wife was sterilizing me," he told me. "I feel sorry

for her and I'm fond of her, but she'll have to understand. I'm a new man now. I'm happy. We've had a week of great carnal satisfaction, but also of spiritual exaltation. I'm drunk, my friend, I'm floating, and I'm screwing, too—I can screw like a matador, did you know that?"

He was, in fact, drunk on erotic exuberance. I didn't have time to tell Isolde, I didn't anticipate what was going to happen when she turned back toward us and took Nathanael by the arm, letting me walk with Valentine. She said to Nathanael:

"Listen, I'm your friend, and a friend of your wife's. She'll suffer terribly over this. Have you thought it over carefully? Is it decided for good?"

"Yes, of course. Do you have any doubts about it? Or objections?"

"Since you ask me, yes, I have. Valentine's very nice, but she's a regular whore."

"Who says so? It's a miserable lie! She's had affairs, she's not a virgin, but from that to being a . . ."

"She's had too many affairs, and too many profitable ones—I call that a whore," Isolde said. "She's lived with Felix Fortunesco, with Tinel Zambilovici, with . . . you know she was with Tinel until a month ago!"

There was a pause. Then Nathanael Ciorap said coldly:

"Oh, you married women, what a free-masonry! You've taken my wife's part, it's obvious you're not being objective. And you believe all the boasting of swine like Felix, Tinel, and company!"

The damage was done. We separated, they continued their walk and we went back home. Isolde vanished with

my bundles of papers and returned an hour later, her beautiful hands filthy, scratched, her forearms covered with black-and-blue marks.

"There," she said. "Now even *you* don't know where they're hidden. As for me, as a militant from underground days, they won't suspect me. And even if I'm arrested, you have more influence to free me than I would have to get you out of prison. I'm going to wash up."

She reappeared, rubbing beauty cream into her hands, and told me about her conversation with Nathanael.

"You were wrong," I said. "You've made an enemy for me."

"It was my duty: I'm his friend, and his wife's. Valentine will drop him the same way she dropped the others. And if you had a little less indulgence for whores . . ."

"Only for unlucky whores who happen to be nice girls."

"Nice girl—Valentine!"

"Unlucky, in any case. So beautiful, and nothing's gone right in her life."

"Whose friend are you, then?" Isolde asked, "Nathanael's or Valentine's?"

"Nathanael's, of course," I answered, "and I'm pleased to see him happy."

"Wait and see what happens," Isolde said severely, rubbing her hands vigorously. I began laughing: she touched me in some inexplicable way, even now, when I thought she was being hard and unfair. What was that, after all, in comparison to the danger she exposed herself to for my sake; and in comparison with her courage in confronting the danger that threatened me now?

III

In fact, it turned out that she hadn't been unfair. Except by pledging her friendship: that was something you couldn't do—you exposed yourself too much. We found that out a few weeks later. People were beginning to notice that we'd fallen into disgrace and no longer came to see us. No longer able to bear the loneliness, unaccustomed to shutting ourselves up at home (since then, we have learned to, painfully but perfectly), we went to Capsa's for dinner one evening. The restaurant was still almost empty; stray customers who didn't belong there came in and ate their dinners sadly, stupidly. The waiters were bored. They talked in normal tones of voice in a corner. There was a draft. We ate badly; Capsa's cooking had deteriorated, like all the voluptuary skills, in a city sick with fear, hate, and boredom.

Suddenly Arthur Zodie walked in, rolling like a ball, his glasses glittering. He saw us, waved, looked around, hesitated—he didn't want to compromise himself—then changed his mind and came over, hand outstretched.

"How are you? We never see you any more. What's been happening? Apparently Herakles Nitzelus wants your neck. What have you done to him?"

"I haven't groveled enough."

"But that's very bad. Very bad. Insolence is only for maritime countries, where you can jump into a boat and emigrate. No, my friend, we're Continentals here, we have no way out. No way out except for magic: dematerialize yourself and become invisible. I've studied the question. When you need it, I'll teach you the secret, it's relatively easy, you just have to be a virgin."

"When I'm a virgin and need your secret, I'll let you

know," I said. He sat down and ordered his glass of brandy.

"You know, my friend Valentine has kicked my friend Ciorap in the ass—sorry, Isolde, but the whole thing's so funny that I tend to talk about it a little wildly. She found him inadequate, genitally speaking, hee hee hee! Hee hee! and sent him back to his combat comrade for the edification of socialism. Leopold is the *deus ex machina:* he encouraged Nathanael in adultery and even bigamy if possible: he felt so lonely. Afterward, he found Valentine too beautiful, and since he's envious too, he explained to her that Nathanael was a poor shit without money or future, and to prove it he got him kicked out for grave defections in his work. Nathanael didn't have his wits about him any more and was making one political *faux pas* after the other. Then Leopold himself took Nathanael on as an assistant, and now Nathanael swears by Leopold, his wife adores Leopold, Valentine's on the prowl, everyone's happy, especially Leopold: he loves having golems, zombies, automatons, and with Ciorap and his wife he's enlarged his little collection."

The door opened, Leopold stuck his head in, looked around, saw us, and nodded amiably. We glimpsed behind him the slim and slightly preposterous grasshopper silhouette of Nathanael Ciorap; there were several others with them. I looked at Arthur. He suddenly seemed to have changed. His eyes were fixed and glassy.

"Don't be silly," I said, "it's just a coincidence."

"Yes, but I know whom I'm dealing with better than you do. He's a poor devil. A shabby and miserable devil, but I don't like the devil. My respects, Isolde, see you soon; greetings, comrade!"

He stood up and hurried out the other door, through the bar. A few minutes later, a waiter appeared, walked through to the vestibule, and came back with an overcoat on his arm: Arthur didn't want to risk an encounter.

Leopold came in, limping heavily. He looked tired. His puffy white face with its cloudy eyes was stamped with an insinuating, humble, and impudent smile. His wife, Countess Dracula, followed, with Nathanael Ciorap and the latter's wife, and last of all one of Herakles Nitzelus' assistants. Everyone was dressed in dark clothes; even Leopold had no dandruff on his shoulders, though his teeth were as green as ever. He asked us to join him at his table. He insisted with a faintly protective smile. I exchanged a hesitating look with Isolde. We gave in. Nathanael's wife smiled at us bitterly; Beatrice, in red, didn't smile at all. Nathanael was cold and grave. Herakles' satellite was cold and grave as ever; moreover, he was congenitally stupid. But Nathanael Ciorap wasn't stupid. He began talking about me with Leopold, throwing him the ball.

"Of course, I warned him in plenty of time," he was saying, "but as usual he knew more than anyone else."

"What did you warn me about?"

"I warned you not to build your hopes on just one man."

"Whom do you mean?"

"You know perfectly well: D. Sava."

Isolde intervened quickly:

"You're not going to talk politics now!"

I was paralyzed: he was saying I had built my hopes on Diocletian, and this in the presence of Herakles Nitzelus' assistant and all the waiters in Capsa's, who were obliged

to make their report to the Security Service. But Nathanael's wife said:

"That's his nature, he's wild and rash. That business of the documents is exactly the same kind of thing."

"Really, comrade," Herakles Nitzelus' assistant said, "you know, Comrade Herakles was talking with Comrade Malvolio just the other day, and they agreed with each other: you should ask for the Party's help in this matter, you mustn't work in an unorganized manner . . ."

"Just you leave me out of it, friend, I have no documents, I've already said so," I replied, as indifferently as I could. Nathanael Ciorap said:

"I remember those evenings we spent back in 1945. You said you had already collected the beginning of your archives."

And he glanced at me, grim, fascinated: he was stabbing me, and the man you kill is always fascinating.

"But he's lost everything since!" Leopold said, and burst out laughing. Ciorap's wife began laughing too, and even Nitzelus' assistant laughed, once he had figured it out. Nathanael joined in, so that only Isolde and I were not laughing.

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CHAPTER

11

I

Our new Opera, which had been built by a Soviet architect and consequently resembled the Opera of Tashkent (or of Tobolsk?), had opened the season with *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. Isolde and I went to that performance. During the intermission, we went out to stroll up and down in the foyer. Isolde said:

"There's Rosette and Morcovici. Let's say hello to them."

The Minister and his wife were standing at the top of the steps that led to the first row of boxes. Short, squat, his neck broader than his head, Basil was staring sternly at the people around him. Rosette, her face ashen, her hair straggly, hung pathetically on his arm.

"You go if you want to. I can't bear to talk to him since Daniela Paciurea's death," I said to Isolde.

"Neither can I, but Rosette's so kind, and she likes us," Isolde said, and she began climbing up the huge staircase, her dress billowing around her, one knee forward like the Victory of Samothrace. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and stared grimly around me. At the other end of the foyer stood a group of men in tuxedos and women in evening gowns, one bright red. They were Western diplomats. Our people circled them, glancing eagerly and greedily at these beings from another world, these women in long *décolleté* dresses and satin or lamé shoes, perfumed, with complicated tinted coiffures; beneath all this palpitated weakly a flesh and a soul that were delicate, refined, pale. Our people had a material, massive look, as though modeled in clay. Another little group, an official delegation, was speaking Russian: these were our great neighbors, even more massive, blocks of violent, impenetrable presence, slaves of their own obscure power. I looked around me: no one but new men. The glacial fauna had overrun our world. They were shorter, heavier than the species I belonged to; their faces were emptier, more accustomed to concealing feelings and ideas, and having fewer of either. Their eyes were dimmer. Their wives were deliberately less well dressed. Such, perhaps, had been the *oprichniki* of Ivan the Terrible; here was the colonial variant, the *compradores*. Isolated in a corner, Felix and Anita Fortunesco made little friendly gestures to me. I forced myself to smile back. Anita was wearing a turquoise necklace and seemed quite at home in our Turkmenoid Opera. I felt like shouting at them, "No, I don't believe you": they

weren't real, their survival meant nothing. In a few years, they would lose their youth and nothing of what they had been would subsist, not even the fornication and the pimpery. I turned away and looked at the clumsy, bored, nervous crowd that circulated in the big marble foyer. Nobodies. Even the people I knew were no longer themselves; they were extinguished, hidden, taking refuge somewhere far behind their faces, far inside themselves. Square shoulders, wide trousers, thick heels, dark dresses, black suits had reappeared, adequately embellishing the new race, the victorious race. In one corner I noticed a group which belonged to the recent past, to the vanished sun, to a bygone period of my own destiny: my friends Tinel Zambilovici and Arthur Zodie. But even here there was an alien element: a stranger who looked just like the Intellectual on posters where an energetic Worker, his eyes fixed on the horizon of socialism, shows the Way to a Peasant in a fur cap and an Intellectual in a double-breasted suit and white shirt with an open collar: no tie, that bourgeois gewgaw; the Peasant and the Intellectual cluster close around the Worker in evident subordination. The person talking to my friends had come to the Opera with an open collar; he was about forty, with a sensitive face and a wide, down-turned mouth with vague outlines. Tinel Zambilovici was holding his left arm at the elbow in his right hand; under the dome of his skull his face too was extinguished. He had not recovered from his emotional disaster. Arthur looked delighted and laughed as he talked.

"The neurasthenia of the jobless!" he was saying as I came over.

"Not a bad formula," the other man said, who was in-

troduced to me as Doctor Costin Slavila. "When I was still working at the Central Hospital for Nervous Diseases, I treated a woman who had been personnel chief somewhere and who suffered from a constant desire to kill her own baby. She had been discharged and sent back to her sewing machine or to her lathe—in any case, to the factory. She no longer had any power, any prestige, any authority, and she unconsciously suffered from this to the point of convincing herself that the baby, because it cried or wouldn't go to sleep, had made her work badly in the personnel service, and so she attributed to the baby the loss of an *organizational* career; hence the obsessional image of the child's murder. I won't even tell you about the police of certain special services who come to us with neurasthenia, nervous shock, anxiety attacks . . ."

"It's hard to be a dervish, and hard to be subject to dervishes," Arthur Zodie said, grimacing gaily. Embarrassed, we pretended not to have heard. What the doctor had said were brute facts, spoken by a professional. Arthur's remark was a generalized judgment, and an independent judgment besides; generalized judgments were out of favor, and independence was *ideological confusion* or the ideology of the class enemy. Only Tinel Zambilovici permitted himself to smile:

"Dervishes. That's an idea . . ."

"Of course," Arthur said, delighted with himself. "Dervishes. Energumens—*energumenoi,* who have an inner power, who militate. Militants."

He chuckled over our embarrassment and made his glasses gleam, peering at us one after the other as he

discoursed pedantically. To change the subject, I said:

"Look, there's our friend Valentine."

They turned to look at her. She was walking alone, molded in a dress of green jersey that made her look naked. She was wearing a slender gold chain that hung between her breasts down to her navel. We didn't know at the time that she hadn't a penny, that the opera ticket was a present from Erasmus, and that she was struggling against despair and disaster.

"Salammbo," Arthur Zodie said. "The Queen of Sheba in mufti. Nationalized. Property of the people."

"Shut up, you idiot," Tinel Zambilovici said. "You never understood anything. You don't understand her, any of you. And I only understood her when it was too late."

"What's there to understand?" I asked. "She's beautiful but giddy, a birdbrain."

"No she's not!" Tinel Zambilovici exclaimed. "Such creatures are the flowers of a civilization, the pleasure and the beauty of history. You don't have to sleep with them. It's enough to see them in the street, or on the stage, or the screen. Aspasia of Miletus, Thaïs, Ninon de l'Enclos, the Venetian courtesans, the mistresses of the kings of France, Lady Hamilton, Mrs. Siddons, Berma, Rita Marlo, Lolita Eisberg, Sabine Sabot, *La Dame aux Camélias* or *en bikini!*"

"The stars of the Western firmament," the doctor said, with a bitter smile.

"The flowers of a civilization!" Tinel Zambilovici exclaimed; "and Valentine Ionesco is one of them, but the earth that has produced her is turning to iron before

our eyes, and you can see Valentine dying." His voice broke and he seemed close to tears. He took me by the lapel.

"That's why she's giddy, idiot! She's lost, like a butterfly in the twilight, or a moth in the sun. She . . ."

He stopped, his eyes fixed on her. Valentine came toward us, smiling gently, sweetly. Arthur whispered:

"She's selling things in the flea market, poor girl, things are going badly for her."

"And you suspected her of being intimate with Ashtaroth," I said.

"You're pretty weak in demonology," he said. "The devils deceive those they entice, and curse their accomplices with melancholy and misery, hidden diseases, or simply boredom."

He stopped, for Valentine was shaking hands with Tinel Zambilovici. She greeted us charmingly, and we introduced her to the doctor, whose face was tense. He bowed curtly. And while Valentine was chatting with Tinel Zambilovici and Arthur Zodie, he said to me in a low voice, with an altogether unexpected violence:

"What a corrupt mentality that Tinel has! What stupid *decadentism,* typical of the *petit-bourgeois cosmopolitan intellectual,* without country or class, lacking any scientific conception of the world!"

"You don't think much of the social and historical role of courtesans?" I asked, smiling. He shook his head.

"It's a disgusting piece of stupidity! It's such an outmoded idea! It's *bourgeois corruption,* and the Soviets are right: when they hear such things mentioned, they bristle with horror. They're right to detest this exhausted and moribund West."

"You know, the institution in question has been glorified in India and China."

"Yes, in the class society," he said bitterly. He excused himself in a hoarse voice, without speaking to anyone in particular; he shook hands with the men without meeting our eyes, and with Valentine, staring so hard at her that he missed her hand. Valentine smiled back kindly, warmly, and watched him walk away. The doctor felt he was being watched, I think, for he stumbled on the first step and almost fell. He disappeared, his ears red. Valentine said:

"Who's that boy?"

"Costin Slavila," Arthur said. "A friend of mine."

"Other qualifications?" Valentine asked, laughing.

"He's a doctor for dervishes. When a dervish becomes a whirling dervish, Costin treats him. It's very difficult to distinguish between a normal dervish and a whirling dervish who doesn't whirl! Hee hee hee! Hee hee!"

"Translation, please."

"I'll play the dragoman," Tinel Zambilovici said. "The doctor works at the sanatorium of the Central Committee, nervous diseases section."

"That must get him some nice connections," Valentine said.

"As a matter of fact, it does: all the mullahs; a few ulemas; several sherifs; and certain ideological eunuchs," Arthur Zodie said.

"You're crazy, but you're nice," Valentine said, and turned toward me:

"How are you? Where's our magnificent Isolde?"

"Up there, at the top of the stairs. Thanks for *magnificent.*"

She turned around, as did Tinel and Arthur. We saw Isolde, Rosette, and Basil Morcovici staring at us. I could no longer avoid going to greet the Minister; I excused myself, climbed the stairs, and talked with the Morcovicis a few minutes. Then I took Isolde's arm to go back to our seats, for the intermission was over.

"Valentine asked me where our magnificent Isolde was."

"Basil also asked me who *she* was."

"And did you tell him?"

"I told him who she was. Why are you laughing?"

"Because I can imagine what you told him."

"I'm not like you. I don't like whores," Isolde said.

During the second intermission, I saw that Valentine was with my friends again; the doctor was there too. And as we were leaving the Opera, I saw them together in the crowd flowing toward the outer darkness.

II

The anxiety by which Isolde and I were beset was unbearable. I had seen it coming: the scene with Herakles Nitzelus had been a declaration of war. Leopold, Ciorap, and their kind would never have dared treat me so insolently unless they had known something we didn't know, something which could only be very bad for us. Isolde was sustained by her pregnancy now. She looked magnificent, ate enormous quantities of grapes, was in good spirits, actually happy; she had wanted this child for so long and so intensely that now she was buoyed up with an intense physical satisfaction. I myself had begun

to drink in order to endure the anticipation of misfortune.

One night I was standing at the Athénée Palace bar, alone. No one dared set foot there any more: too many foreigners and too many informers. Arthur Zodie appeared nonetheless, and perched on one of the high stools. He was served by the sullen bartender, who wasn't managing to reach his sales quota and foresaw a reduction in salary at the end of the month. Arthur himself was furious.

"If she only left him in peace," he was saying. "Still, he's the one who's to blame. He who won't leave her alone. What filth! It takes a type like that to really wreck himself. *Cupido dementat.*"

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't want to tell you," he answered gravely. "I don't want to be indiscreet. Let him tell you himself, if he wants to."

"Who's *he?*"

"He'll tell you himself," Arthur repeated, apparently drunker than I had thought. "He's coming soon anyway," he added. "He's in the men's room. He's all right, I even like him, or at least I feel sorry for him. I'm capable of pity, you know. And he's capable of idiocy. He's crazy now. I can understand how a man might be a dervish politically. But not emotionally. Anything, but not that!"

Doctor Slavila made his appearance at that moment. His skin was yellow, and the whites of his eyes were yellow too. He walked hesitantly, swerving to the right every three steps, then to the left. He collided first with the wall, then with the corner of the bar. His mouth was drawn farther down at the corners than ever.

"Good evening, doctor," I said.

"G'vning," he answered.

"A brandy for this poor dervish," Arthur said to the bartender.

"Arthur," the doctor said, "I demand that you respect the only thing in my life that has any meaning."

"Really?" Arthur asked, getting excited. "You're giving me lessons now? Soon you'll be telling me about proletarian morality and socialist legality. But you take your mistress out in State cars. In the people's vehicles!"

There was a pause. The doctor leaned against the bar, staring into space. Arthur let himself be seduced by another idea.

"By the way, how does it happen that no one's stuck you with a nice little criticism, just between comrades, to get you thrown out or at least demoted? You can't have no enemies—that wouldn't be natural!"

And he looked at his friend suspiciously. The doctor was staring at the rows of bottles in front of him. Arthur shoved his glasses back onto his nose with his thumb and said:

"They feel sorry for you, is that it?"

Costin Slavila's tragic mouth trembled and then grew still.

"Of course that's it," Arthur said. "You'd make anyone feel sorry for you. Except for her. What does she want from you? She doesn't love you."

"Listen, Arthur, your friend doesn't know what we're talking about, and it doesn't mean anything to him . . ."

"Oh yes, you can tell him anything, everything. He knows the secret history of all Bucharest. And he never tells anyone anything. You can trust him. He knows

what's happening to you. Not that I've told him anything. Tell him, comrade, do you know what this is all about?"

"It's about Valentine Ionesco, isn't it?"

"You see!" Arthur crowed. The doctor looked at me, his mouth open.

"How did you guess?"

"From what she's made you do. You're not the first victim."

"Dear comrade," he exclaimed, "you don't know her. None of you knows her. She's a good, simple, humble person who's suffering, and who's not made for suffering! She needs help to adapt herself. She's lived in a different world. She'd be different if she'd had a man beside her from the beginning and if she'd lived in a pure, new world; as you see her now, it's the bourgeoisie that's deformed her! But it's not too late."

"Bah!" Arthur said. "Bah! Listen to him! Really, listen to him! What a dervish! You're crazy! You've caught it from your patients. I like you, you idiot, and I don't want to see you wreck yourself like this."

"I'm not wrecking myself. I'm happy. Shall we have another?"

"Listen," Arthur said, "just answer one question, and then I'll never mention her again. Are you sure—look me in the eyes with your drunkard's face—are you sure that at this very minute there's not some other man at her place?"

The other man looked at Arthur. His eyes shifted, fell.

"You see," Arthur said. "Monsieur George: two cognacs!"

"No," Costin Slavila said. "No, I don't want to drink any more. You come with me to her place right now."

He stood up, his face pale and shiny. Arthur hesitated, then said firmly:

"All right, let's go." And to me: "Pay for ours, will you? I'll settle with you later."

I caught up with them in the street. We walked past the Royal Palace, crossed the Strada Luterana, and turned into the Strada Stirbey-Voda. Arthur stopped talking. When we reached Valentine's house, Arthur said:

"I'm staying out here."

"No, you're going up with me!" the doctor exclaimed furiously.

"I'm not going up, I can't!" Arthur Zodie shrieked. "I'm afraid!"

"Oh, you're afraid. Do you take back what you said just now?"

"No, of course not, there's a man with her, but I'm afraid of him, it's the Devil!"

The doctor didn't know what had happened to Arthur in this very place one New Year's Eve.

"Come on," I said, "we'll all go up. I'm with you and you know I don't believe in the Devil, I believe only in God, the Devil doesn't show himself to men like me. All right, we'll stay on the stairs, the doctor will go on and convince himself, and then you'll pay for the drinks, it's simple."

The doctor ran up the stairs like a man who's made up his mind to commit suicide and doesn't want to prolong the agony that has driven him to it. Arthur stopped at the last turn before Valentine's landing and clutched my arm. We saw nothing but could hear perfectly. Valentine asked who was there and the doctor said his name through the door. We listened to this dialogue:

"Is that you, Costin? So late?"

"Yes, I . . . I have to talk to you."

"Of course. Tomorrow. Not now. I'm tired."

"Please. Just five minutes!"

"No, I can't. I'm not even dressed."

"Please, I beg you. Just one minute, just a second!"

"No, Costin. Leave me alone. I'm going to bed."

"With whom?"

There was a silence. Then Valentine's voice:

"You're crude."

"No, I'm only suspicious. It would cost you nothing to open the door and let me in, instead of leaving me out here. I'd come in, sit down in a chair, and leave a second afterward. I need that."

Another silence. Then Valentine's voice:

"Yes. I understand . . . Someone told you?"

"No! No one. Let me come in. I need to trust you. I need to believe in you. Let me come in for just a minute."

"No, I can't. Poor Costin. I'm sorry. I'd rather you hadn't rung at all. But since you're here, there's nothing else to do. You're punished for your curiosity."

She was speaking calmly, with a certain regret (not too much).

"What do you mean?" Costin Slavila said with an effort. "Then it's true?"

"Go on home, Costin," Valentine said gently.

"I'll kill you! I'll strangle you!"

"With what right? Am I your property? That jealousy of yours is capitalist jealousy. Go back to your wife and don't bother me any more. Go on, go home to bed."

The door slammed shut; we could hear the key turning in the lock. I went up the last steps in two leaps

and stopped the doctor, who was about to throw himself against the door, his fists raised. He struggled hard, but I was much stronger than he was. I dragged him down the stairs.

"I'll kill her! I'll strangle her with my own hands!" he was groaning.

"Shhhh . . . You don't want to get us all arrested. You'll wake people up. Shhhh."

Arthur and I pushed him outside. Arthur said nothing. He was sorry he had been right, and his fear had sobered him up. We set off toward the Palace Square. Suddenly the doctor stopped and said in an astonishingly calm voice:

"I want to go back. I have to. I have to talk to her. I understand. She wanted to test me. She wanted to find out if I really love her. If I loved her the way she wants me to, I'd have forgiven her. But it's better late than never: I forgive her. I've forgiven her already. I have to see her again and tell her I've forgiven her."

And he started to run. We grabbed his arms and Arthur said:

"Are you crazy? Did she ask you anything? She sent you home to your wife. She was annoyed at having been caught, that's all. Besides, she was very calm. She didn't ask your forgiveness, she doesn't want any kind of love from you, she doesn't want anything at all. Leave her alone now, she needs to be left alone, she's busy making the beast with two backs with someone . . ."

The doctor lowered his head. He seemed to be reflecting intensely. Then he said in an absorbed, absent tone:

"What can I do? Where will it end? What does she want of me? I love her, I love her."

He repeated faintly, sadly, "I love her."

"Let's go have something to drink," I said. "Let's go to the Athénée bar and have a glass of something to raise our spirits."

III

Malvolio Leonte's secretary telephoned me: her chief wanted me to come and see him at eight that evening. I went with my heart in my mouth. The enormous building was plunged in darkness, except for one row of high windows: the windows of Malvolio's office. I saw the Security guards at the entrance, the elevator with its steel grillwork, the endless silent corridors, then more guards posted at the intersections of the corridors. The secretary, officious and pale under the fluorescent lights, asked me to sit down and went on reading a Soviet novel. I waited about half an hour. The door opened from time to time to let out fat, graying men with complacent, energetic, dull faces: ministers, chiefs of services. Finally the secretary asked me to go in. At the other end of the room, far away, stood Malvolio's desk. In front of it, two armchairs, one empty, the other occupied by Herakles Nitzelus. Behind the desk, Malvolio.

He was the only being I could neither like nor detest with that warmth which somehow brings even people who hate each other closer together. "Do I hate him?" I was thinking as I walked through the enormous room.

"Do I want to see him dead?" No, I wished him no harm. I didn't hate him. But if I'd been able to have some genie spirit him away and transport him through the air to Mozambique, I would have done it happily. Or have myself carried off somewhere far away from him. I advanced with a respectful expression, staring at that puffy, falsely jovial, falsely effeminate, falsely ecclesiastic face: were the omnipotent eunuch ministers of Byzantium like this? He was smiling at me good-humoredly, his elbows on the desk and his heavy, fleshy hands clasped together in an attitude somewhere between the tomcat and the Monsignor. He had sat there behind that desk for fifteen years, and for fifteen years he had spread sterility around him, stifling everything that was new and alive, leveling men, lowering energy, proliferating grim puppets, this shabby genius, this acrobat of impotence, regarded as an expert in this part of the life of the nation of which he had been the curse ever since he had been made its master. He had cultivated hatred, persecuted friendship, crushed men of integrity, raised up lackeys with a preference for creatures who were sullied and corrupt. He might have been replaced three different times, but our fate had not decreed that this should be the case. His first rival had been transferred to another sphere of power. His second had been Diocletian Sava. The third, after a few months of secret conflict, died suddenly. And the old tomcat continued to rule us, from time to time changing the prison wardens when they had made themselves too odious or been too crude, yet he remained loyal to them and granted them nice little stipends. He was our ambassador of winter, an abominable snowman like his

illustrious Polish colleague Dr. Faul. He greeted me with his false and disturbing good humor:

"Well, here you are, condescending to come and see me at last! I thought you'd forgotten me."

Of course anyone who wanted to see him asked for an audience and waited a week or a month, sometimes two. His joke was a cruel irony. He pointed to Herakles Nitzelus.

"You know Comrade Nitzelus? You know each other, don't you? At least so I'm told."

He was enjoying himself enormously, staging a circus act with serious clowns. Herakles Nitzelus smiled ironically:

"We know each other very well."

He held out his hand and touched mine. Malvolio asked me to sit down, rang for coffee according to the official ritual; then he looked at us complacently; you could almost hear him purr. He smiled kindly, greedily as if we had been two fat chickens.

"Well now, let's see: why don't you two get along better together? What have you against each other?"

"I don't have anything personal against him, you know that. He's the one who's been keeping his distance. He came to see us with his wife once, but since then he's dropped us completely. He's very cold with me, doesn't conceal his antipathy. He knows how to be insulting when he wants to, this boy."

"What do you have against this poor man?" Malvolio asked me, his face still beaming. "What has he done to you? Why are you so sensitive?"

I smiled obliquely and shrugged.

"Well, we'll have to settle this," he said amiably, glancing at Herakles Nitzelus, who stood up, said good-by, and left. Malvolio asked me:

"What have you against him?"

I exploded: I had done nothing to Nitzelus; it was he, through his men, especially Leopold and Nathanael Ciorap, who was waging a campaign of insinuations against me. Malvolio demurely lowered his eyelids and from time to time murmured gravely:

"Is that so? I can scarcely believe it. . . . No, he's not capable of such a thing, you must be mistaken."

I suddenly realized that he was on Herakles Nitzelus' side. That shut me up. Malvolio took advantage of my silence to say:

"Such things are all a matter of personal hostility between you, I don't want to get involved. I advise you to re-establish the normal relations that should exist between comrades. The Party demands this of you and cannot tolerate such a situation. I hope we understand each other."

I said nothing. But Malvolio, who had concluded in a new tone of voice, surly and brutal, didn't insist on acquiescence: he was too accustomed to being obeyed. Then he asked:

"Listen, why don't you look for another job? You know the Party and the State have inaugurated a policy of economic stringency, and it seems that there's a good deal of financial disorder in your department!"

I started, and answered passionately:

"Comrade Malvolio, you need only appoint a ministerial commission and investigate. I can hide nothing, nor

wish to, and I defy anyone to find anything illegal or irregular in our work!"

"A commission would find such things," he said paternally, "irregularities. Believe me on that score. *I can assure you.*"

I said nothing. What he meant was that a commission would receive orders to find irregularities at any cost, that is, to invent infractions, if need be, in the work of the organization I directed. So he had decided to replace me. In that case, I was going to resist. I had right on my side, I had done good work, the respect I enjoyed was actually due to financial successes.

"I've always thought you were a well-behaved boy, but it appears that I've been deceived," he continued. "You've just stirred up a whole scandal around yourself, which reminds me that back in 1950 you were quite noisy, quite out of line. You seem surprised to hear me mention scandal. But what's this project *everyone's* telling me about?"

So that was it: that was why he had summoned me. He remembered me as one of the men of the thaw, and Herakles Nitzelus had told him about the project. Leopold had betrayed me, and the story had grown and spread for several months. I tried to keep the sudden tension of my nerves from showing.

"I don't know what you're referring to, Comrade Malvolio."

"To your biographical projects."

He smiled again. I smiled in my turn.

"Oh, that! I'm surprised people still remember it."

"People remember very well. And the idea seemed very

interesting to me, too," he said amiably, staring at me hard. I saw the trap, of course, and answered:

"You're right, the idea in itself wasn't a bad one, but it exceeded the powers of just one man; it would have taken a powerful, *organized, collective* effort."

"Then it's true you wanted to write the biographies of the interesting men of our times?"

I shrugged.

"Dreams—the kind of thing you plan at twenty, you know . . ."

"And whom did you have in mind? Did I have a place in your gallery?" he asked gaily. I went cold with fear: then he himself was afraid. And he was powerful enough to crush me in his fear.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of anyone in particular. I hadn't got that far when I abandoned the whole thing."

"You were right to do that. Individuals considered in isolation don't count. You know, no one is indispensable, no one is irreplaceable," he said, staring straight at me. "Only the Party counts."

I believed and shall always believe the contrary; I was thinking, "Yes, you are indispensable, and I am, and Nitzelus, and we're all significant and precious, and each human being on this earth is irreplaceable, his loss is irreparable, and his birth enriches the universe." But I tried to look merely innocent and intimidated. I looked at him and said to myself, "What an extraordinary man! What an amusing and remarkable demon, what a singular beast!"

"And you've really collected nothing, really nothing, nothing at all?"

I smiled bravely.

"Yes, I had something at the beginning, but I burned it all."

"But why burn it?" he asked, raising his eyebrows in benign astonishment. He didn't believe me.

"You know, I realized I couldn't help being subjective, I couldn't be sure of keeping to the Party line, and besides, in certain cases the men I would have written about would have revealed themselves as hardened enemies of the working class, agents of imperialism. The more I thought about it, the more impossible such an undertaking seemed. Then in our day and age we don't write memoirs any more . . ."

"It was a habit engendered by bourgeois individualism, it emphasizes the person, the individual. But there exist Marxist historians in our *magnificent country,* there exists, *for the first time,* a *scientific* historiography, proceeding from the perspective and the positions of the working class. Your idea, my friend, was a dilettante's idea, impregnated with *bourgeois subjectivism.*"

"Exactly," I said. "That's why I gave it up."

He stared at me thoughtfully, toying with a pencil. Then he smiled.

"I hope so," he said kindly; I amused him. "In any case, your idea is the proof of a *grave ideological confusion.*" Here his voice went cold and hard. "Your subjective and individualistic choice *couldn't be interesting.* It could only be uninteresting. It wouldn't have grasped the *essentials.*"

I acquiesced with a nod and a woebegone look.

"I hope you're really convinced," he concluded with a discreetly menacing glance. He held out his hand:

"All right, comrade. Come and see me once in a while."

It was a purely formal gesture. I left feeling the abnormal lucidity and the nervous gaiety of a survivor after a bombardment. Isolde was waiting for me, her face drawn, her mouth pursed with anxiety. I described the interview, and she agreed that I was in danger, that Malvolio had called me in to frighten me, but that it was still impossible to know what he was going to do. Actually, it was quite predictable, but neither of us wanted to look such a future in the face. We talked about it until late in the night, in bed, where I sat up with Isolde leaning against me, her body as hot as it had been when we were sitting on the concrete block that the waves on the Three Slippers Beach rocked back and forth.

IV

For a while, nothing new happened to me, except for my anxiety attacks. Anxiety doesn't affect you once and for all. It rises, becomes almost unbearable, subsides, rises again, feeds on itself.

I served on the Central Committee during a meeting; it was directed by Malvolio's new assistant, Alfred Anania, and all the Party militants who worked in this department were invited to attend. We left at about eleven that evening. In the purplish fluorescent light we all looked like corpses. We were exhausted, poisoned by tobacco smoke and hatred. Groups no longer formed. Sometimes we left in pairs, but generally one by one. Friendships had been pulverized under Malvolio's pressure, which was brought to bear on us through Herakles Nitzelus. The only ones not to separate were those

united by the irreconcilable hatred that the others felt toward them. This hatred eliminated the possibility of reconciliations that would mean treason toward an ally. We had argued endlessly in the void, more concerned to strike our enemy—our brother—with perfidious allusions than to get on with the work: the work existed only as an excuse for the subterranean conflict, just as the nation and the world seemed to exist only as an excuse for the pitiless game of domination.

Arthur Zodie, although present, hadn't taken the floor. He came over to me and murmured:

"Shall we leave together?"

We walked down the long silent corridors that resembled those of a great modern hotel, where Security guards took the place of bellboys. Arthur said dryly:

"It was beautiful. In what *bolge* are we?"

I gave him the ambiguous reply he deserved:

"I haven't read the *Inferno,* I don't know what you mean."

"But haven't you read my unwritten Treatise on Demonology? The one I'll write when each will produce according to his means, limited as they are, and receive according to his needs—infinite."

"Oh yes, my friend, I read long ago the Treatise on Demonology you'll write one fine day."

"You're sad, comrade. You're bitter."

"No, I'm as enthusiastic as the rest of us. Only I'm a little tired. Come and have a drink."

We went to the bar of the new Restaurant Berlin. It was full of strangely dressed young people with long hair. They had greedy, unhappy eyes; they wanted something without knowing what, or without daring to admit

it to themselves; something was missing, but they weren't allowed to say or think A or B, for that risked leading to X, arrest and a dressing-down, to Y, torture and imprisonment, to Z, death (though no one knew *how*—the method of capital punishment is secret). Someone was fiddling with a broken phonograph, producing deafening noises. The bartender and the waiters were serving clumsily, disgusted by the size of the tips. We sat down in a corner and began smoking cigars and drinking vodka and beer.

"Smoking cigars in public isn't a good idea, you know," Arthur said. "A pipe is bourgeois, Anglo-Saxon, and snobbish, except for the S-shaped Dzhugashvili pipe; but cigars are capitalist, Wall Street. Tonight, at least three of the informers in here will hand in reports on our cigars."

"I know, but I'm too tired, I don't give a damn. . . . What's the difference? How's your friend the doctor?"

"He's sifting his miseries in endless conversations with his wife. The poor woman loves him and suffers terribly; and he tells her what a noble friend she is, kisses her hands, and describes how he slept with Valentine and how Valentine flouted him. You know, the doctor, poor Ciorap, and our friend Tinel remind me of a sonnet by my favorite poet, Antonio Machado:

> *Nel mezzo del cammin,* pasóme el pecho
> La flecha de un amor intempestivo.

Well, that applies perfectly to the three of them. You know, it's all over between him and Valentine. Valentine wanted him to introduce her to his important pa-

tients. One day, my little Costin telephoned to ask me to spend the Sunday with them in Snagov. I accepted, and on Sunday morning he called and told me to wait for them downstairs. So I stood there watching for the shit-colored Pobeda the hospital lets him use. Not at all: they drove up in a ministerial Zim as long as this bar. Valentine was in a white blouse and a gray skirt, quite serious, well-behaved, and actually quiet. I asked Costin, 'Is this the hospital car?' He answered in a flattered little voice, 'No, this belongs to the comrade who's inviting us.' I had a foreboding and I kept still. Finally we got to Snagov—the trees, the little birds flying around, a magnificent villa, rattan chairs, and Basil Morcovici, the master of the house. Costin had taken Valentine to the Central Committee beach and had introduced her to various dervishes, including Basil Morcovici, who had immediately invited them to Snagov for the following Sunday. Poor Costin vaguely sensed what was coming and asked me to come along, hoping my presence would prevent certain tête-à-têtes: a rather clumsy maneuver doomed to failure; I wasn't going to get Morcovici on my neck. But he greeted me pleasantly enough, addressed one or two words to me, and began talking to Valentine, went swimming with her, etc. He was happy, it's extraordinary, I even saw him laugh; he has white teeth and two tusks which help him dig out the sociohistorical roots of phenomena: he has a lot of hair on his chest and looks as if he were made out of the trunks of mossy trees. She, on the other hand, was voluptuous, perfect, divine: Venus, Astarte, Isis, Anaïtis, Lilith, Kamadevi; in a word: Pandemos, *Nuestra Señora de los Burdeles.*

Costin was covered with blisters from the sun last time; after a minute in the water he came out and said (I was cooling off with a beer on the grass), 'Arthur, I feel sick.' And he began shivering and his teeth were chattering. He had fever. He had subconsciously understood, and his subconscious was making him sick. I made him lie down and covered him up. I am not only the author of a Demonology, but of a mythical Psychology that I published under the pseudonym of Siegfried Freudenhaus; I saw what went on, let him suffer, and admired the house. There was a big copper mantel, paintings by Tonitza and Petrasco, elaborately bound French books from the thirties illustrated by Vertès and Dufy—in other words, the former owner was a wealthy capitalist, and the people's democracy had added only a *Krasnaya Zvezda* TV set to his luxury. I went outside to finish my beer under a big orange umbrella. The lake was blue and flat, the sailboats white and triangular, the poplars vertical and silvery, the sky infinite and pale: a gentle Wallachian autumn—peace. They had found a clandestine radio transmitter in the monastery out on the island, imprisoned the monks, shot the district secretary of the Party, a former Iron Guardist, moreover. The reeds rustled in the wind, laughter floated out over the water. At noon, Morcovici sent Costin Slavila in a car to Bucharest to see a doctor. The rest of us went to lunch in the Central Committee canteen, which was almost elegant with its immaculate table linen; the comrade waitresses wore white uniforms. We went to get our own bottles of beer quite democratically. The radio offered Soviet music and advice to the collective farmers. The dervishes at the ta-

bles were clean, calm, ugly, and comfortable, accompanied by their ugly, well-scrubbed, and unmade-up wives. They respectfully greeted the chief dervishes and carefully looked away in order not to endanger their own careers. Valentine laughed cautiously at Morcovici's jokes. She was perfect: discreet, serious, proper. Now her telephone number has changed and her little apartment is inhabited by a major in the Security Service. She's Venus *victrix*, Aphrodite Nike."

"My dear Arthur," I said, "Morcovici has a wife, who is also a member of the Party, and two children."

"You don't know whom he's dealing with. I told you: *victrix*."

Not long after this, Arthur telephoned me at my office.

"I need to see you immediately," he said, and hung up. He came right away, though I was still working with my technical director. I apologized to the latter: Comrade Zodie had something extremely urgent to discuss with me, a matter which would admit of no delay. The man understood and left us alone. Arthur sat down and said:

"I'm dividing the Demonology into Socialist, Western, and General. And our friend Valentine has to be put in the General section."

He was out of breath, gloomy, frightened. He looked up and saw the portrait on the wall behind me. Suddenly he seemed terrified, shuddered, raised his arm to cover his face, then calmed down.

"Oh, it's only Lenin. I thought it was Himself. Lenin's only a particular case: *Lucifer philanthropus atque propheta*."

"Arthur, you lack respect for the ideas and historical personalities that are sacred to us. You're out of sorts today. What's the matter?"

"Something terrible has happened. Is there a microphone anywhere in this office?"

"I don't know, but I have nothing to conceal from the Party."

"I see," Arthur said, standing up. "Let's go for a ride. A little air wouldn't do you any harm. You look terrible."

We took a little ride between the lake and the pseudo-Babylonian towers of the Polygraphic Combinat.

"Not much of a car you have," Arthur said. "You're a very small pasha. *Pobeda* means pasha with one horsetail on his standard. *Volga,* two tails. *Zim,* three. *Zim special model* means the green standard of the Calif, Sheik Ul-Islam, Commander of the Faithful, Successor to the Prophet of the Race of Ali, Terror of Miscreants and Revisionists. You know, Erasmus came to see me this morning. He never tells anything, he doesn't like anyone, but this was too much for him, and he has a weakness for me. And I can't resist what he told me. You're not afraid of the Devil anyway. I have to tell you, I'm too scared. Morcovici has recently been sent to the West on some delegation, one of those commissions to the UN, you know, the kind with names made out of initials. He made a last terrible scene with poor Rosette when he was leaving. He forced her to move out with the children. All she had to do was telephone the secretary, who had the key of a little villa for Rosette. Morcovici came back last night. Before picking him up at the station with Erasmus (the latter in his capacity as *apparatchik* of the Central Committee responsible for the Morcovici minis-

try), the secretary telephoned Rosette. She answered in a funny voice, but the secretary paid no attention. When Morcovici arrived and found she hadn't moved out, he had the secretary telephone: the Comrade Minister wasn't going back to his house, he was going to the Ministry. But it was a maid who answered—you know, they're employees of the Council and receive a half-salary from the Security Service too, it's only natural and surer than microphones—well, the maid was screaming, 'Madame has just killed herself.' Morcovici sent Erasmus to find out. Rosette had decided that having been a housewife in a workers' slum and then becoming the Comrade Minister's wife and then going back to being a housewife, alone, abandoned, and despised, wasn't worth it; she had locked the children in the bedroom and fired a hunting rifle into her mouth. Erasmus was still quite upset this morning. She had shot away most of her face, apparently. You know what Morcovici did? He spent the night with Valentine. And fucked her furiously, I'm sure of that. She must be happy. *Vénus, tout entière, à sa proie attachée.* Yes: *hominum divumque voluptas.* They were right, those sinister Church Fathers who identified the gods with the demons: perfect and voluptuous idols, but in stone; and their pestilential, ruinous, evil power! Into the treatise with you, Venus! In the chapter *De Mutata facie Diaboli.* I don't want to see her ever again, now that I know who she is! I've always known! *Apage!* Get thee behind me!" shrieked my friend Arthur Zodie, turning around and gesticulating like a man driving off invisible presences. Then he stopped and stared at me fixedly.

"And to think that I fucked her too, I fucked the

Devil! *De Coitu cum Diabolo!* Hee hee hee! Hee hee! Brrr! Bouah! I'm scared. Let's go get something to drink. Stay with me! Don't leave me alone!"

I kept him company and brought him back to his house dead drunk. When I left him, he was snoring. I went home and told Isolde what had happened. Her eyes filled with tears and for a minute all she could do was repeat:

"Poor Rosette! Poor, poor Rosette!"

Then she said:

"She must have come to hate him terribly for doing that to her."

"What makes you think so?"

"But just think, a member of the Central Committee, and a minister! Remember, he threw out poor Dionis Paciurea for his wife's suicide!"

"I don't think it's the same thing . . . Dionis and a minister . . ."

"It's disgusting!" Isolde exclaimed, her eyes shining.

"Your virtue is too militant, darling. Remember the evening at the Opera: Morcovici can't have forgotten what you told him about Valentine. And now, if things go badly, he won't support me any more, to say the least."

Isolde looked at me in consternation.

"Oh, I've been so stupid! And how I regret it!" she murmured.

She had the little statue mouth, *os rotundum,* of her bad moments: I always found her irresistible when she was sorry or angry. I kissed her and said:

"Don't forget, it's my project that's the cause of it all. Your mistake wouldn't have any importance if . . . you understand, don't you?"

And I kissed her again, on the mouth, on the eyes, on her red cheeks that were covered with freckles.

V

It was from Arthur, too, that I had my last report about Valentine (except for a final encounter with her, much later). He asked me to take a walk with him. We were strolling along under the foliage gilded by the first nocturnal frosts.

"My friend, I have to tell you something that concerns you personally. Otherwise I'd never betray the secret, and I hope you'll use it only in your strictest interest."

He was jubilant, enjoying himself hugely. He exploded:

"It's tremendous. News! You'll never guess. Great news! The other day I received a telephone call from Nathanael Ciorap: he wanted to know if I'd been asked to see Comrade Morcovici. Yes, I had been, and I was rather surprised too: usually I don't work with him directly. Ciorap asked me to come and see him at once. I went, and whom do I find with Nathanael and his wife? Their brain, their string-puller, their operator—in other words, our excellent Leopold. They were disturbed, grave, conspiratorial. Ciorap, his legs crossed—he has enormous feet and skinny calves—was smoking nervously. Leopold was drinking his tenth cup of coffee. They felt they were in grave danger, Marxist intellectuals living through a political drama. In half an hour, Morcovici was expecting Ciorap *at home,* not at the office. 'You've made a ridiculous mistake,' Leopold was saying, 'you

should have told him you were sick, dodged the issue, found out what he wants from you. Now it doesn't matter, you go and try to find out what you can expect.' 'It's obvious,' I said. 'Leopold's wife complained too openly about Valentine when Nathanael was living with her, and he wants to frighten you to make you hold your tongue.' 'Me? Never!' little Madame Ciorap screeched. 'It was Isolde who complained about her!' That's why I'm telling you the whole scene. You understand, don't you? Your wife spoke quite severely about our friend Valentine, and Leopold and the Cioraps are scared enough to remind everyone of the fact so as to keep out of it themselves. And since they're the lice under the arms of our good Herakles Nitzelus, the latter will be sure to report everything to Morcovici. So now that I've warned you, it's up to you to decide what to do.

"Let me go on with the tactical conference with Leopold and his zombies. Leopold anticipated a lot of possibilities, all except the one that happened. He has a remarkable tactical imagination, and a false and sterile judgment. Nathanael left, dead with fear, and we waited for him; meanwhile, listening to Leopold's speculations, I drank their best bottle of wine. An hour afterward, Nathanael came back, pale as a ghost. He sat down and said, 'I denied everything.' He had never set foot in a house so big and sumptuous. The police on duty at the door, the big car parked in front, the walk through the hall and the dimly lit salon had intimidated him completely. The chief was waiting for him in the library, his elbows on the desk, his chin on his chest, staring at him fiercely. Ciorap was terrorized and made some vague answer to the amenities Morcovici uttered in his harshest

tone. He made him sit down and drink something. Then he asked his opinion of Valentine. Ciorap stammered something or other. 'Is it difficult for you to answer me? Have you no opinion? Weren't you once friends? Didn't you even live with her?' Nathanael had his first violent reaction: panic. 'No! Never! She rejected me! I didn't dare!' The Minister stared at him for a long time with terrible contempt. Then, after exchanging a few trivial words with him, he rang and told the secretary to have the comrade driven home in the Ministry car. Nathanael left bewildered and agonized. The fact is that Venus has attached herself to Morcovici and driven him crazy with the worst kind of jealousy, jealousy of the past that evokes the image of irreparable things.

"I left the Cioraps a prey to Leopold's advice, came home, slept badly, had nightmares. The only thing that reassured me is that Valentine didn't appear. And the next day (I was invited to the Morcovici's for the day after), the next day I saw Tinel Zambilovici: he had been there too, which scared the wits out of me. Tinel described the scene: same mysterious entrance, sumptuous and disturbing, Morcovici just as nasty and bitter. But Tinel was inspired: 'Let him do whatever he wants! I told him, "Yes, Comrade Minister, I slept with her, then we separated, I wanted to marry her, I didn't marry her, but all that's a trifle in comparison with the tragedy of not understanding her! No one's understood her! No one's been capable of it! She's an orchid lost in the vegetable market. A creature like that is produced once a century in every country. No one's been able to appreciate her, to hold her, to fondle her, and she, poor creature . . ." ' Finally his exaltation and his fear made

him burst into tears. The dervish behind the desk watched, surprised, discountenanced, and slightly disturbed by this intellectual in his worn clothes with his oversize head, crying and talking the way Morcovici had never heard anyone talk; at best he had read such things in books. He asked Tinel to control himself and sent him home. Now Tinel's very pleased with himself, though he's still a little scared.

"That was my case too, until the moment I found myself face to face with Morcovici. He was glum—his orang-outang look—and he had a glint of jealousy in his eyes. I was casual, serious, modest, the perfect distinguished Party militant. My opinion of Valentine? An exceptional person, a pure spirit, a firm character, and intelligent besides. Why hadn't I married her myself? 'Comrade Minister, you're joking. She wouldn't have me! I'd have been delighted. But she was right, I wasn't what she needed. For me, it was an episode—unforgettable, but unreal. I can scarcely believe it happened.' 'Yes,' Morcovici said, 'but her class mentality . . .' Then I said: 'What class? *Petite bourgeoisie:* her father was a magistrate. Her mentality will depend on her companion, if he loves her, if he dominates her by his strong character and a mind molded by dialectical materialism. Maybe you'll think my idea is a little extreme, but I believe we have to apply revolutionary theory to everyday life as well. And our Chinese comrades are talking about the transformation of conscience. You read reports where a bourgeois, an intellectual, a peasant admit, "My conscience has been transformed!" ' And Morcovici, very impressed, very serious: 'That's true, very true.' My friend, the interview was a triumph! I was shivering

with fear that *she* would suddenly appear, but I was lucky."

That was my last conversation with Arthur Zodie. During the following winter of 1958–59, Morcovici married Valentine. On August 23, the anniversary of the Liberation by the Soviet armies, Arthur was decorated with the medal of the Anti-Fascist Struggle (he had deserved it for exactly fifteen years, but it happened to be remembered just then) and Tinel Zambilovici received a promotion. Ciorap remained in obscurity, and lived henceforth in terror: the difference in treatment convinced him that he had offended that dangerous person Basil Morcovici. Ciorap's wife was fond of saying, "You know, I saw Comrade Morcovici and his wife at the theater. She's very nice, really, she seems like a remarkable woman, and so simple, so natural! A real comrade."

✳✳✳✳

CHAPTER

12

I

My chief, Herakles Nitzelus, announced that he disagreed with the way I was handling my work. It was decided to analyze this work. Summonses were sent out. As usual, the meeting was prepared in the corresponding section of the Central Committee; the participants knew what they had to say, the conclusions were established in advance. As usual, too, the victim nursed himself on illusions, thinking he could protect himself and avoid the inevitable.

That morning, I stopped first at my office to finish up the work that couldn't wait: the meeting was scheduled for nine. As I was climbing the big staircase, I met a little secretary: Leopold's mistress. The poor girl was still

thin, unhealthy-looking, and bewildered. She was about twenty and had a certain wild charm that shone through her slovenliness. That morning, she seemed full of a strange exuberance and gaiety. I greeted her and she stopped. I was about to ask her how she was, quite banally, but she left me no time and said:

"How are you, Comrade Director, I hear you're having troubles?"

This was so preposterous from a little secretary who could be fired at the first reorganization or the first purge that I divined Leopold's malefic breath in it: it was he who was making this poor marionette dance. I answered, of course:

"Oh, everyone has his troubles."

And I passed. She laughed aloud on her way down the stairs. It was a bad sign.

An hour later, I went into the room where the meeting was to be held. Through the tall windows, you could see the gray sky, the bare trees, the asphalt of the empty square with two policemen in the middle. At the door, people greeted one another with superficial cordiality. Groups of three or four people were forming, speaking in low voices. Glances told me nothing. No one spoke to me. Tinel Zambilovici and Arthur Zodie shook my hand, then they went to the long table and sat down far away from one another. Leonas Tanase came in, saw me and came over to me. In such circumstances, the least gesture has enormous weight. Leonas spoke to me. He did more, he *said something:*

"How are you?"

"As you can see."

"Yes," he said, with a wry laugh. "Don't worry about

it. You're young. You have your whole life ahead of you. How's Isolde?"

"She's at home, waiting for me to come and tell her how it went."

"Tell her Theresa is thinking of her. Come to dinner at the house one of these days. We'll talk on the phone."

And he sat down. Alfred Anania came in at this moment, followed by Basil Morcovici and Erasmus Ionesco: Alfred with his official joviality, the Minister furious as always, Erasmus looking like a corpse taken out of the morgue refrigerator. They sat down: Anania presided, Morcovici to his right, Herakles Nitzelus to his left. Beside Morcovici, Erasmus. Beside Nitzelus, Leopold and his assistant Ciorap. There were two dozen persons in the room, including Isaias Proorocesco, recently promoted to a high post in the Ministry, Felix Fortunesco, who had inherited Dionis Paciurea's job, Tinel Zambilovici, Arthur Zodie, and others. How many friends did I have among all these people? There were no friends any more, there were only men by themselves.

The report was read by Erasmus. We were childhood friends, but I could expect nothing from him; he was a militant of the Central Committee, and besides, this report had been drawn up by others, revised and corrected by still others, read, annotated, and approved (which I did not know at the time) by Malvolio himself. I listened to it distractedly.

". . . grave political errors . . ." he was reading in his monotonous voice. "Waste . . . abusive bonuses given to certain employees . . . damages inflicted upon the State . . . lack of principles . . . lack of a collective direc-

tion . . . sectarianism . . . personal direction . . . cult of personality . . ."

They were mortal blows. All very vague. But the accusing formulas, the ritual words were all there, and it was these, of their own accord and without argument, that implied condemnation. I was nonetheless determined to defend myself.

". . . grave lack of revolutionary vigilance which has permitted hostile elements to infiltrate . . ."

They had forced me to fire dozens of secretaries and clerks, one of whom had committed suicide: those poor devils hadn't been hostile, they had merely wanted to earn their bread; they hadn't infiltrated, they had been hired by my predecessor. I looked at Alfred Anania: I knew that he had been a traitor and an informer, and that he had killed Daniela Paciurea and his first wife. I looked at Basil Morcovici: his own past was heroic, they had tortured him without managing to make him talk; condemned to death, he had been saved at the last moment; but his wife had committed suicide on his account, and he had broken Dionis Paciurea's life, and he was crazy with jealousy over Valentine. I looked at Erasmus: I knew he had faith in nothing, that nothing was sacred to him and that he was close to despair. I looked at Herakles Nitzelus: he had probably been an informer and certainly a Fascist, the Party had expelled him, and Malvolio had had him recalled when he was convinced his spirit had been completely broken. Ciorap was sitting at the same table with Morcovici, who made him tremble with fear, and with Leopold, himself a hero as an adolescent, fallen now, infamous and a bigamist as

well. Felix Fortunesco was also there; he was there because his wife slept with Alfred Anania. Isaias Proorocesco was also there, with his divorces and his revolutionary speeches and his platitudes. One of those present was the brother of Morcovici's wife, who was going to be even more powerful than before for the same reason. Four of the participants had been this sister's lovers. Over us floated the presence of Malvolio Leonte and the absence of Diocletian Sava: Diocletian who had been terrible, pitiless, and cruel, to whom powerful men owed their fall and perhaps their death; Malvolio who for the last fifteen years had strangled everything that was born under his domination.

Was this a *bolge?* Were we all devils? No, we were only human beings, impassioned, tormented, fierce, and weak. We were subject to the torture of our own greed, of our own pride, of our hatred, our dissatisfaction, our fear. Alfred Anania knew Malvolio had the papers his late wife had discovered; and he wanted women; he would never be happy, never satisfied. Morcovici was hopelessly poisoned by Valentine's past and by his love for her. Erasmus had married his hideous wife to advance his career, and his soul was like a desiccated jellyfish stranded on the beach, rotted by the despair that was to kill him. Nitzelus, sick with hatred for me, a hatred too great to be justified or even explained, an abscess in his suffering heart, suffered at being so tiny, at being insulted and flouted for it since childhood, spurred on by his wife who itched with the same desire to *arrive*. Proorocesco, feverish with unsatisfied ambitions, with uneasy mediocricy, was maddened by the success of others. Leopold was about to fall, ter-

rified by his bigamy that made him more than vulnerable. Nathanael Ciorap suffered from not existing—it is terrible to be a golem—and Tinel Zambilovici, who had tried to be Tristram, had been dismissed like a schoolboy. Arthur Zodie took refuge in half-madness. Felix Fortunesco was enchained by more than love, by the fact of being a member of a couple, bound to Anita and her cancer. Leonas with his sick wife—another cancer, of the blood this time. And the rest: all of them. And myself, with my pride and stubbornness that had brought me where I was and would take me even further, to the brink of total disaster; myself, with my pregnant wife and my chimera on my shoulders that spurred me on toward grief and perhaps toward crime: a chimera so furious that it made me capable of relishing the fact that I was here, relishing the situation and the knowledge I had of so many secrets that surrounded me, savoring them and taking a strange, sensual pleasure in this life I was steeped in, a warm, seething living substance, sickening and splendid, like any living substance, a jelly destined to perish and rot, a spirit doomed to extinction, to silence and nothingness, hatred, lust, exaltation, heroism, ecstasy, kindness, love. That was what I saw around me, where an "observer," as we used to say, or a visitor from the West would have seen two dozen men in gray, with ashen or pink or pale faces, with papers in front of them on the table, two dozen administrators and politicians of the new society. I saw the life in us, the strange face of God in us, and I took an enormous joy in it all, mingled with horror. God have pity on us! Do I judge them? Do I judge *us?* No, I *know* them. I know *us.* I was one of them. I was their brother. I am still. I love them.

Even the hatred they have for me and I for them is secretly able to unite us: the repulsive and typically human face of contingency, of integration, of love.

Erasmus finished reading the report. Anania asked if there were any questions. Two or three raised their hands and asked me poisonous questions: "Did the comrade systematically hire persons alien or hostile to the working class?" "Has the comrade consulted and sought the help of the suitable authority?" *The suitable authority* was Nitzelus. I stood up to answer the questions and to comment on the report:

"Comrades, the report seems *interesting,* but it has the great defect of being drawn up in general terms. It does not furnish the concrete examples which would give value to the criticism."

Interesting was a polite condemnation. The report was *interesting,* but not *accurate.*

"Reference is made to grave political errors. I ask for concrete examples. The report speaks of *hostile elements* which have *infiltrated* through my intervention. Eighty per cent of the people lately discharged were not hired by me, but by my predecessor. This comrade is present."

The latter exclaimed:

"I inherited them from mine!"

"You see? I hired new *elements* on the personal recommendation of comrades participating in this meeting. So that I do not accept being held responsible for the class *composition* of our *collective.* But the so-called abusive bonuses and the so-called waste that we are blamed for seem to me still less justified. During the last two years, we passed from a *working deficit* of four million to a net profit of four and a half million . . ."

"That is not the question," Alfred Anania said with a disgusted expression, as if he had been smelling excrement.

"Pardon, permit me to finish. We have therefore achieved not only the elimination of the deficit but also a profit for the State: a total of eight and a half million a year."

"That is a practicalistic, shopkeeper's point of view," Alfred Anania said.

"Excuse me, I am answering the accusation of waste. The bonuses were calculated according to the laws in effect until last summer. Higher bonuses corresponded to such a major gain. What was I to have done with this money? Put it in the bank?"

"Yes," Basil Morcovici exclaimed.

I was momentarily thrown off. One of the strangest habits of a tyranny is to punish crimes which were just and meritorious actions at the time when they were committed. I continued:

"According to the law, the bonuses were due to those who had done the most for the progress of our department. I know that it is in our department that the greatest bonuses have been distributed, and it is possible that this has provoked a certain envy among our colleagues in other departments. But it is we who have procured the greatest revenues for the socialist economy. If the Party and the State have meanwhile decided to suppress the bonus system in our economy, I have nothing further to say. But the facts for which we are reproached occurred before this resolution was made."

"You should have *realized!*" Alfred Anania exclaimed violently. "Where were the Communists in your cell?

You are guilty of a criminal waste! You were throwing the earnings of the workers out the window! It is scandalous!"

There was nothing left to say: the magical system of transformation of an innocent past into a guilty past, of readjusting the past to the present, had been invoked, was being applied. Two women in white blouses came in with trays of coffee and mineral water. When everyone was served, Alfred Anania asked if anyone had any further observations to make. There was a silence. Then Isaias Proorocesco asked for the floor. He said:

"Let the comrade seek no longer to hide behind excuses. In my opinion the report is sufficiently well argued. It explains quite clearly a situation we can no longer tolerate. The principal fault of the cell in question is not to have informed the Party of what was happening. The comrade rejects the report's criticism. It appears that he does not like to be criticized. He wants to establish a cult of his own personality, to sing the praises of his experience and his successes. He boasts of his profits. But he does not ask himself this question: What policy do these profits serve? We have no need of an affluence produced in just any fashion, but of an affluence produced according to the immortal principles of Marxism-Leninism! We have no need of a narrow and empirical *practicalism*. We have an ideal, the rest of us here, and we are realizing it by following the wise teachings of our Party and the glorious experience of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union!"

Leopold spoke next, but without shouting, without slogans. He was afraid he would drive me to speak of the secretary I had hired on his recommendation (which,

though capable of many things, I would not have done), yet he was even more afraid of Herakles Nitzelus. Isaias Proorocesco had spoken with passion and spite; Leopold was calm and kindly.

"We have known the comrade for a long time and some of us feel a personal friendship for him. But his real friends are his comrades, the Communists who draw his attention to his errors and help him to correct himself. Each of us is subject to fatigue, to losing his true perspective; one cannot remain forever in the same place. I think that the comrade should take a rest and *work in other departments.*"

This meant, be discharged. Someone less informed would have supposed, listening to Leopold's sanctimonious speech, that he was suggesting I work in several different places at the same time in order to vary my activities and amuse myself, after the monotony of my past work.

Ciorap spoke in a grave and judicial tone:

"I think that the report is accurate. Everyone knows the question. The comrade's defects are well known too: a *certain* cult of personality, a *good measure* of lack of principles: this emerges quite clearly from the report. *Which does not mean* that the comrade hasn't achieved good things *too.* But we must consider the situation dialectically, and deal with essentials. I believe we must give the comrade an opportunity to make a constructive self-criticism by his actions."

Herakles Nitzelus, with a bitter smile, then took the floor:

"The last speakers sound like schoolgirls. What does this *petit-bourgeois* sentimentality mean? This attitude

is *non-Communist!* The evil must be pitilessly stamped out! *Which does not mean* I have anything personal against anyone. It is a matter of *objective facts.* The comrade's attitude is objectively *hostile.* The *shameful* waste of the people's money, the comrade's *unprincipled practices,* his *tepidity* and *conciliationism* and his *lack of policy* jeopardize his *physiognomy as a Party member.*"

And so on, the endless singsong, coldly hammering out the dry ritual formulas. A music-hall knife-thrower tosses his blades one after the other around his partner. Herakles tossed all his words at the center of the target: the *physiognomy of a Party member.* He referred to Leopold:

"Mention has been made here of friendship. Very good, let us be friends. Lenin teaches us to take everything that is good from bourgeois culture, but in a critical manner. I therefore advise the speaker to consider his friend in a critical manner. I, for instance, am fond of the speaker in a critical manner."

And he began to laugh. Everyone burst out laughing at this transparent threat. Leopold laughed out of the other side of his mouth. Only Leonas Tanase remained impassive. I was alarmed, hearing the diabolical caterwauling.

Basil Morcovici spoke brutally and furiously:

"The Party policy, comrades, has been and is absolutely *straight.* I reject any attempt to *insinuate ideological confusion!* The comrade doesn't wish to accept the criticisms. *We will help him!*"

Several cold smiles appeared briefly. "Help" meant striking any blow except the *coup de grace,* which is called "unmasking" or "laying bare."

"The Ministry adopts the viewpoint of Comrade Nitzelus, and I thank this comrade in the name of the Ministry: yes, indeed, we must root out all such political and ideological weaknesses."

The tone was now much more severe than that of the previous discussion. Alfred Anania concluded still more severely, though he was less gruff than the Minister, merely dry and businesslike:

"I do not understand the laughter of certain comrades; this is not a joke, it is our work itself, comrades, it is our *Party life,* it is our struggle for Party legality and socialist legality that is at stake. *We propose*" (which meant *we order*) "that the Ministry take measures to restore order in this disrupted department. At the same time, the cell will have to discuss this case; its work, it appears, *has not been very brilliant*" (which meant that the secretary was to be discharged).

It was over; we stood up. People talked of other matters. No one looked at me. My jaws clenched, I went straight home. It is hard to be unable to appeal to anyone, to have no refuge: solitude is particularly terrible when poverty and a lack of diversion and of sociability reduce man to a precise circle, fixed and controlled by power or associated with power. I was astonished once to read in Saint-Simon that Chamillart was "lost" and had to return to his château in disgrace: I have understood this since, and I even wonder if it's the privation of the château—three or four rooms, a hall in common with our neighbor, hot water three times a day for an hour at a time—which makes the real difference. What makes disgrace intolerable is the absolute power that has inflicted it and that makes it resemble death.

At the house, I managed a smile and quoted to Isolde Eminesco's *Ode in Ancient Meter:*

I thought I would never learn how to die.

Then I told her everything. We couldn't eat. That afternoon, I went to the office to take care of the work that was waiting for me. In my absence, Leopold and Ciorap unexpectedly arrived at the house and let Isolde offer them coffee and cigarettes. They seemed excited, gay, and energetic. Leopold explained to Isolde:

"It was very difficult. He wouldn't let us defend him. He exposed us to Nitzelus' anger. He needs you: teach him to listen to his friends' advice. Otherwise, he's on the road to disaster. He has to be supple, flexible. He should go to see Herakles Nitzelus: that's the key."

Ciorap improved on this:

"You're his wife, you can save him. Go see Zita. Get back into her good graces, and everything will go better. Not as well as before, but at least better than . . . what might be ahead of you."

Isolde answered:

"I'll think it over. I'll tell him about all this."

She could scarcely speak; she waited for them to leave and tried to get some control over herself, not to let them see what she thought of them. She had to be discreet; she knew they would go to Herakles after leaving her, even if they hadn't been sent by him. Finally they left her alone. The bell rang again; it was Theresa Tanase, who kissed her and said:

"Don't you get all upset, now, either of you. Leonas has been expelled from the Party, do you hear me, expelled! By . . . well, that doesn't matter. One day a

minister, the next out of a job, forced to sell his furniture and his books to have something to eat. In 1950 we both wanted to go and work with our hands on the Danube–Black Sea Canal. And we survived that. Don't let them discourage you. Such ordeals temper the character."

And she kissed Isolde again, told her we must come to dinner with them, and that Leonas was very eager to see me. Isolde knew he hadn't taken the floor. One could ask no more of him; the case was settled in advance, he would have done himself harm without doing me any good, and Leopold himself was threatened with a fate like my own; it was only later on that he was able to escape Malvolio, as I have said. The Tanases did all they could for us now, and not without risks; as was proved by the fact that they were the only ones to do so.

The next day, the first paper my secretary handed me was a letter from the Cadres Control; I was released from my responsibilities as of the first of the month: after my visit to Malvolio, but before the meeting I have just described.

II

Afterward, for a long time, nothing more happened. The shock of disgrace is like a birth, in that it is a sudden passage from an extremely dense environment to one that is relatively empty. The tension, the dangers, the goals, the pressures, everything loosens up and disappears; there is nothing left but solitude and boredom. This is only one aspect of disgrace, and the most com-

fortable one. There are others, which I was soon to know. The extreme disgrace which lay in wait for me had been experienced by a former cell comrade of my wife. He knew nothing about my situation and came to ask Isolde to speak to me in his behalf. "Your husband is a kind of figure," he said. "Perhaps he could give me some kind of work to do at home? I know I can't be hired anywhere, I've just been expelled from the Party. They don't even want me at the factory as a workman. Yesterday, not knowing what to do, I went to look for work as a street cleaner—you know, where they hire former prostitutes; well, they refused me; they have too many intellectuals, it gives them a bad *class structure*."

I spent my days wondering why Malvolio had summoned me. Obviously he and Nitzelus had decided to discharge me, but why call me in? To enjoy himself? To see how far he should rely on the rumors still circulating about my project? And if that was it, how had he judged me? Insignificant, negligible, or serious and therefore dangerous? And why had the meeting to analyze my work taken place, now that it was obvious that everything had already been decided in advance? To reinforce Herakles Nitzelus' authority and thereby that of Malvolio, his master, by means of a public execution? Nothing reinforces authority like an obvious act of injustice. It is agreeable to be mad when one has absolute power: only sanity does not submit to it, defies it. Had I convinced Malvolio of my fear, did he now believe I was harmless? If not, the danger was only beginning.

And I was obliged to wait. I couldn't have found a job anywhere. You don't hire a man who has had an important post. Not even as a vegetable seller. First you

call the cell and wait for its opinion. The cell telephones the district, the district calls the Bucharest Committee, the Bucharest Committee asks the Central Committee. And there is no answer: one month, two months, six months, a year, two. Or else the answer is, "Do as you think best." So you don't hire him—it's more discreet. In benign cases, on the contrary, you telephone on the Party's behalf and the applicant obtains an apprentice's place in a factory, or if he's a white-collar worker, a job as a storekeeper or accountant in some cooperative of shoemakers or yoghurt producers. My case was of the first kind; I had nothing to do but stay at home. I read books of which I couldn't remember a line. I walked with Isolde in rarely frequented streets—one must not be seen, that might be irritating. At night I woke with a start after two hours of sleep and couldn't manage to doze off again. After a few months of insomnia, I went to see Doctor Costin Slavila. He looked exhausted, helpless, glum.

"Try to forget about your worries," he said. "Try to amuse yourself."

"That's difficult. My wife's going to have a baby, and I'm worried about the immediate future."

(Among us, one didn't accumulate savings: we never knew when a sudden monetary reform might sweep everything away.)

"I could give you drugs," Costin Slavila told me. "But the effect isn't a lasting one. Don't think I'm talking lightly. I've had dozens of cases: men expelled from the Party or subjected to the Party's censure, or those who have lost their jobs. I treat them at the Central Hospital; but there are the victors, the ones I treat at

the Central Committee clinic: always neurasthenia, overwork, neuralgia, functional disabilities. The pressure is difficult to endure, even for those who come out on top. We are all brothers in psychic traumatism," he concluded, laughing joylessly, and he advised me to take tepid baths.

But nothing did any good. Our apartment suddenly seemed much smaller; it was stifling; the whole city was ugly, melancholy, and you couldn't get out of it; there was no hiding place, no refuge. Our neighbors, our janitor looked at me differently, spoke to me differently, a man who stayed at home, who had no work, who was no longer called for by an official car.

Then there was no more money in the house. Isolde endured it all better than I. Sustained by the jubilation of a body that could at last bear its fruit, she looked well, slept calmly, and ate as many grapes as I could give her, never getting enough. When she complained at not having had any for several days, I tried to sell the car. But no one dared buy a car any longer: a purchaser would be exposed to police investigations as to the source of the money. And the State did not purchase from individuals. All the cars were getting dusty in garages, on blocks of wood.

I began to frequent the State stores, which sold secondhand objects. I sold my books and the very pictures I had bought there; I was offered a third of what I had paid. We lived on this for several months. The silver went too. Then I carried our finest rug there. I was told:

"We aren't taking things any more, there's no more room, there are no customers, no more money."

I went away, the rug on my shoulder. It was winter,

dark already, and freezing. The streets were full of the swarming crowds of all the cities of the East, bored, greedy for pleasures, frustrated, and somber. Ten-story scaffoldings were lit by spotlights: construction went on day and night, pouring concrete by artificial light; the city was changing its face, it was going to be more beautiful and still melancholy. I bumped into someone: it was my friend Arthur Zodie. I stopped. His glasses gleamed.

"How are you?" he asked.

"You wouldn't like to buy a rug?"

"My salary's been cut," he answered. "How's Isolde doing? Well? That's fine. Good-by."

And he went off, disappearing into the crowd.

On another day, I went out for a walk with Isolde. In her condition, she had to have exercise. We ran into Anita and Felix Fortunesco, elegant as ever and in an excellent humor. They stopped to congratulate Isolde on her appearance with obvious pleasure.

"But we never see you anywhere!" Anita said. "Why don't we hear from you?"

And they walked on, kind, smiling. But it is difficult to be heard from in such circumstances. We saw no one, and no one saw us. The great question now was eating. I decided that perhaps enough time had gone by for me to be acceptable again.

After all, they couldn't condemn me to starve for having incurred the hatred of Herakles Nitzelus or for being suspected of planning a collection of biographies. I couldn't bear idleness, I was used to working. I tried to avoid Malvolio's realm and to appeal to some powerful person independent of him; perhaps there was some use for an administrator like myself who had, after all, a

certain experience? The only man I knew was Paraschiv Ionesco. I telephoned his secretary, who told me:

"I'll give your message to the Comrade and call you back to tell you when he can see you."

She never called back. I telephoned again and she told me, several days in a row:

"The Comrade hasn't come in."

The next time it was another secretary, who told me:

"I don't know a thing about it; the other secretary takes care of such things."

The next day the first secretary told me:

"The Comrade has been very busy this week. I'll see."

Finally she became severe:

"The Comrade is too busy now. Try later. When? Whenever you wish, comrade."

Paraschiv Ionesco didn't want to see someone who had incurred disgrace from Malvolio Leonte. I tried to speak to Alfred Anania. The secretary answered several times, invariably:

"The Comrade is in a meeting."

Erasmus went into hiding too; the secretaries were insolent, annoyed. And there was no more money at home, it was now no longer a matter of grapes but of potatoes, and I was sleeping one hour a night at best. There had been an epidemic of suicides in the city. I prayed to God, the unknown. I had learned to pray and to love God when I had been happy, out of gratitude. But now, at night, when Isolde was asleep, I stood up in the empty library in the dark and I prayed, "God, give me light! Save us! Give me the strength to resist and let me know what must be done!" Night after night I prayed,

and I felt I was ready to explode under the pressure of Moloch and of my solitude. The future was bricked up.

III

One morning a policeman brought me a summons to the Bucharest Police Command: I had to go at once. I left him in the hall for a moment and went back inside to get my coat. I had a whispered consultation with Isolde. She said:

"Remember, you know nothing, there *is* nothing."

I kissed her and I left her. We didn't know for how long we'd be separated; perhaps forever. But there were chances that this first time wouldn't be definitive; there would have to be gradual stages.

My policeman took me into another street than the one—Calea Victoriei—where the Police Command is. We went down the Strada Cantacuzino and turned into an anonymous building without any kind of sign or plaque. Cars were parked in the courtyard, and inside, down long silent corridors, we passed young officers going from one office to the other. It all seemed quite peaceful and businesslike. My guide went into one of the offices, then came out and held the door open for me. I walked into a room that was a great deal like my director's office, with the same portrait of Lenin on the wall, some landscapes, and also a TV set. A man my own age received me. He was in civilian clothes, wore glasses, and had a pale round face; he looked like a scholarly type.

"Good morning, comrade," he said. "Let me introduce

myself: Lieutenant Colonel Popesco. Take a seat. It's about the documents you've collected."

He was polite, in a cold, arrogant way. They're all like that—the guardians of the State, the State itself, and therefore everything. I began explaining, volubly, nervously, what I had been explaining to everyone for a whole year. He listened with a cold little smile.

"You mean you have nothing left? You've burned everything, you couldn't find anything, not even some scraps of paper in the ashes?"

"My house is at your disposal." He looked at me a long time and said:

"You know we have ways of finding out anything."

"You have the means *provided for by law,* I don't doubt it," I said. He smiled:

"Yes, those means, and if necessary, others."

He wasn't ashamed. He continued:

"You know, for five minutes we suspend the Constitution, and . . ."

"Yes, of course," I said, breaking into a forced laugh, "but in my case, you know, even if I had kept something, you understand, I would have burned it all before my conversation with Comrade Malvolio Leonte, to whom I would never have permitted myself to say things that were not true."

I hoped this was clear. And to veil the meaning of these remarks, I added:

"But what little I had I destroyed long ago, back in 1950."

"You alone know if that happened, and how, and when. I request you to consider our conversation as provisional. You haven't as yet given me a definitive answer."

"Yes, I have."

"No, I don't consider it definitive. Think it over. Here is a telephone number where you can reach me when you've recalled some detail you haven't told me about as yet . . . Something you haven't remembered up to now . . . And then we'll have to talk about the content of your papers. I mean the ones you *intended* to collect, as well as those which you had and then burned. We have more to talk about. Thank you for having taken the trouble to come. Would you like a car?"

No, I wouldn't like anything. I said good-by and walked home to Isolde, who was waiting for me.

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CHAPTER

13

I

From that day on, I could expect something worse at any moment. Isolde was approaching the end of her pregnancy. We were eating carefully; I continued to sell small objects: her clothes, an alligator bag, the Venetian shawl . . .

We knew that they didn't believe my story, and that even if I had destroyed everything they wouldn't close my dossier until my death. We knew that what was waiting for me was a very modest post, with a laborer's salary and the hostility of the poor and work-weary men toward a comrade who had previously been one of their masters. At each reorganization of the vegetable markets or the construction sites, men like me were to be the

first let off, and long months would pass before I found a new job, where the story would begin all over. Of course, I could always crawl to Herakles Nitzelus. But first of all, it is very difficult to hand yourself over to the mercy of a man who has done you a great deal of harm. Secondly, there was a doubt large enough to stop even a desperate man: supposing he didn't confine himself to merely enjoying my humiliation but indulged himself so far as to subject me to the cruel joke of a refusal? It would be as if you surrendered to your enemy and instead of letting you live, he killed you. To humiliate yourself and to gain nothing but shame by doing so wasn't worth the trouble. And then, even supposing such behavior won my pardon or the indifference of Nitzelus and his master, what could I gain by it? To survive until the next glacial wave, the next stage of the freeze? Or until the next thaw—when I wouldn't fail to show myself too liberal and be marked out for the next freeze? And meanwhile the dossier would be constantly open, and I would be continually exposed to examinations and investigations that might go to extremes I prefer not to mention, knowing all too much about certain techniques. What then? Burn my archives and live comfortably, indifferently, fat, gloomy, empty? This policy attracts a surprising number of adherents, as the glacial drift of the leaders and chiefs proves. But doing this demands that you discount other ways of living, that you be unaware of freedom, that you feel no need of lucidity. And if you have once enjoyed such things, to cut yourself off from them is like death itself.

My neurasthenia was taking new forms: I could no longer stay in our apartment, which seemed stifling to

me and too small, like a prison cell. I went out, but the streets, the entire city, failed to give me the sense of limitless space. In the same city, in the same nation, were living, sitting at their desks at the same moment, Malvolio, Nitzelus, and dozens, thousands of men like them. You couldn't escape the realm over which their power extended save by death. But then what would become of my documents? They would be burned; enough libraries had been destroyed for me to be convinced of that. So I would be dead twice over; there is nothing I hate so much as death. I knew I could not escape it, that all humanity will not escape it, that everything will end in silence and the Void, as Arthur Zodie's favorite poet says:

la sombra, el silencio y el olvido.

But at least I could fight, multiply the works of life, enlarge and extend the consciousness of humanity, drive back the edges of darkness, and succumb saying, "I have done everything that could be done." Had I done everything? Wasn't there some solution I had not envisioned?

Tyrants should not reduce their subjects to solitude and idleness. It gives them an opportunity to think. And they should not offend or frighten them, for there are men who do not forgive the offenses, nor the fear that has been inflicted upon them. One day, I realized that I had been thinking according to the categories of absolute chauvinism, that splendid product of our century. I realized that the world was much wider than the one in which we lived—which was only a fragment. And with alarm, I *saw* the solution I had never thought of before. It came to me as I was talking to Isolde. I was

walking up and down the room, five steps from one wall to the other and five steps back; I must have walked a great deal in those days, talking endlessly. Did she think I was crazy? She never revealed it. She sat on the bed and stared at me with her gentle amber eyes. I told her I had decided what to do.

"I thought of it a long time ago," she said calmly. "I didn't want to mention it to you. I wanted you to decide alone."

"But you?" I said, alarmed by what I had thought and said, and by her calm.

"I won't be separated from you. I'll follow you." And as I stared at her without a word, she went on: "I've put more heart than you have in this business, and I suffered more when I reached the point of no longer believing in it. Now I have nothing left, except you."

"And . . . the baby?"

The baby wasn't born yet. Isolde was in her eighth month. And we were deciding its fate.

"You know, with the baby it will be impossible," I said. I dared not look her in the eyes.

"We'll try together. After all, they won't keep back a baby," Isolde said, and she smiled at me.

Her eyes were luminous, her expression blissful. I thought she looked very beautiful, her complexion rosy, her body not deformed by her pregnancy, only heavier. I was frightened at having dared to find the solution; frightened too by Isolde's love. I had the heart to contemplate a solution that might separate me from her, and this to save my project, about which I had no doubts, of course—but is there anything in the world worth the pain of separating yourself from such love?

And she had the heart to risk what might be a permanent separation from her child; of course, it was unlikely that the masters would have the cruelty not to let us have our child—but was there anything of which they were ashamed? And her love for me, and I myself—were they worth her tearing herself from this child?

"We'll try it together," Isolde said, "and if they don't let us go, you'll go alone."

I looked at her, horrified, standing before her where she was sitting on the bed and looking up at me with ecstatic eyes. I avoided meeting them. I said:

"No, I don't want to go alone. I couldn't."

"Yes," she said gently, "it's the meaning of your life. You know perfectly well you'd be capable of anything to save this thing. You made up your mind some time ago, without knowing it."

She was already no longer speaking of herself, she had forgotten herself; she said:

"And now we have to work out a strategy to reach that point; we're far from it now. You'll have to become a *figure* again. First of all I'll go to see Zita Nitzelus. And I'll offer to read the official speech in honor of Woman's Day at the meeting organized by our cell."

I don't know—I've never wanted to know—how her interview with that dangerous shrew came off. But I attended the meeting in celebration of Woman's Day, which took place in a great hall decorated with slogans on red banners, official portraits of a fake realism that gave them the empty and superhuman expression of the emperors' statues at the end of the Roman Empire, like the Colossus in Barletta; there was a long table furnished with a red cloth and a microphone; the

presidium was composed of two enormous, unfeminine women wearing suits with padded shoulders, and a thin man with thinning hair and an ashen face: he represented the Party, they represented the Union of Democratic Women. One of them introduced Isolde, who had her nine months' belly now and red cheeks; she was in magnificent health, and I heard someone beside me murmur:

"The comrade has been well chosen."

I turned and noticed a person I knew: the wife of Malvolio Leonte. She was a member of the Central Committee of the Union of Democratic Women, and like her colleagues, she controlled the proper functioning of the machine; she had probably written the speech whose text was being read at that moment throughout the country. Isolde read it in a hard, ringing voice: she had made speeches to youth groups during the struggle for power in 1944 and 1945; she hadn't forgotten everything. Comrade Leonte watched her with something approaching tenderness: this tall, beautiful, red-cheeked woman with her prominent belly was like a poster image approved for Woman's Day by the Party; she was almost too perfect, even the virago tone and the gesture of the Statue of La Marseillaise were there. We like to meet our mental images in life, and we're all the more profoundly touched the less likely they are. This moment was the imperceptible beginning of my recovery, for Comrade Leonte spoke to her husband and dissolved a primary layer of his hostility toward me.

II

Herakles Nitzelus received me sitting at his desk without getting up to shake hands. I was the one who held out mine, across his desk. He was cold and reserved, inwardly rejoicing but careful to conceal the fact. He hadn't expected this; as he knew me, I would have died rather than yield in this way. On each side of his desk were sitting his two assistants, creatures who don't even deserve to be named, for as Arthur Zodie said, "Those two are like the means of production, that can serve either the bourgeoisie or the working class: whether their master is one or the other matters little to them." One was red and bony, with curly hair and eyes shining with rascality; the other was pale, pasty, precociously bald, with dead-fish eyes, *apparatchik*—a Pharisee. They didn't speak a word during my entire conversation with Herakles Nitzelus; they were merely there as witnesses of his triumph, to repeat what they had seen and heard. Nitzelus was waiting for me to begin. Then I understood the power a dangerous plan can give; I understood the Communists and their indifference to personal dignity, to shame, to lies: only the goal matters, the best means are the most direct. I said gravely and humbly:

"Comrade Nitzelus, I have done a great deal of thinking in recent months about our conversation at Comrade Malvolio's, and I have reached certain conclusions."

I no longer said to him *Domnia Ta* but *Domnia Voastra,* to accentuate my inferiority. On the other hand, almost all my phrases had a double meaning, of which the real one, which was defiance, afforded me a furious and bitter secret joy. From now to the end, there were countless occasions when I spoke in the same manner, it

had become almost a mania; and I understood only then, from my personal experience, certain words of Prospero Dobre, who in the same manner openly stated his revolt and his decision to throw off the yoke, without being understood because his audience didn't possess the key.

"You weren't in any hurry to reach these conclusions," Nitzelus said, and a Samoyede smile wrinkled up his little yellow face. I continued, still humbly and seriously:

"I admit it has been difficult for me. But you know how consistent I am: once I've reached a conclusion, I conform to it to the end. It is such a conclusion that I have reached during this period of my life and that of our people. I don't want to put myself in a situation where it is impossible for me to give our people the best I have to offer. And aside from my wife, the first comrade to whom I have spoken is you; I feel that this is natural and just. I want to convince you of my devotion to the Party, Comrade Nitzelus."

What I found just was to deceive him first of all; and I wanted to convince him in order to achieve my purposes. But I wasn't saying that what I wanted to convince him of was the truth. I wanted to give the best I had to offer to my people, and the best I had was my memory and consciousness of its unique and irreplaceable existence. Miraculously, the words that spoke the truth also concealed it. I have often been obliged to say what I did not believe, and it was always painful and difficult; now that I was finally saying what I really believed and what I wanted, the ambiguous formulas flowed from my mouth as from that of the Pythoness. Herakles must have interpreted "put at the service of the people the best I have to offer" as the worn, repulsive formula of sub-

mission: "devotion to the Party" actually signified submission to it, and "it is just that I speak to you first" meant to him the recognition of the fact that it was he who had his foot on my neck. As for the words "I want to convince you," he was free to interpret them as expressing a vile and cowardly desire to please, instead of a proud and malevolent tactic of rebellion. I continued:

"I'm ready to accept any work, and I beg the Party to entrust me with as modest a task as possible; I shall carry it out with joy and enthusiasm. And I shall do what I have done all too little hitherto: I shall *consult* the comrades who have more experience" (which meant I would take Nitzelus' orders) "and follow their *advice*. I will take these matters very seriously and no longer lose sight of the Cause I have promised to serve, and I ask you to help me in this, and to remind me by your presence and your advice what I promise you never to forget."

He answered:

"What you have just said is good. It shows that you have *reflected* and *understood:* you have examined yourself, you have seen the abyss and been afraid. The Party admits no deviation from its line and will mercilessly crush any weakness, and any enemy influence infiltrated into any sector. Mercilessly!"

I knew how to take this: he was staring at me significantly, like Monsieur de Charlus explaining to Marcel the kind of young imbecile who would have refused to introduce Morel to him, if I remember correctly. I nodded gravely, with a humble and stupid expression. We exchanged a few more strophes and antistrophes of this

kind: it was the ritual of capitulation, and it took the place of the ancient gestures—kneeling, striking the ground with the forehead. I ended with a choirboy's smile:

"And I look forward to more than relations of *principle* with you, but also, as before, to a personal and friendly contact."

Herakles said with a satisfied but still harsh expression:

"Your *companion* has already seen mine. You know very well that I have always appreciated you. The rest depends only on you.' "

"I shall try to convince you that I sincerely desire . . ." I said, without going on to say what it was I desired. I hope I have illuminated the matter since. I exulted grimly over this counterpoint of secret rebellion. They saw me crushed, and indeed I seemed to be so. A month afterward, I was assistant director; four months later, promoted to a more important post than the one I had held at the beginning of the freeze: I was being rewarded for having provided a subject of contempt; they were sincerely grateful to me. Malvolio Leonte constantly protected a man who had solicited an audience and wept in his office with real tears, for reasons less grave than mine: this creature's career suffered no further setbacks. I found my friends again—Leopold, Ciorap, Erasmus, and dozens of others. The excuse most of them employed for an elegant reappearance in our lives was the birth of my daughter: they telephoned to congratulate us and came to see her. At the clinic my wife received a basket of flowers with a card—of a

grade of cardboard we no longer have—bearing the printed name: MALVOLIO LEONTE. Black sheep who reform must be encouraged.

III

Some months afterward, we were even invited to an official party again. It was in honor of a great film actress who was visiting the country on her way back from Moscow. The affair was given in the little Royal Palace. The halls were hung with the same Renaissance Flemish tapestries, and people crowded to see what Tinel Zambilovici would have called, with a Mephistophelian smile which showed his brown stumps, an efflorescence of capitalism and of Western imperialism of this half of the century. Again I saw my peers in black clothes, their faces still pale, their eyes naturally or deliberately dim (for Rumanian eyes are so easily filled with fire), and their wives without jewels, their dresses halfway between the Paris fashion and that of Irkutsk. People looked at each other with a sullen indifference or even hostility, watching for a smile that was too broad or too faint, an imprudent word, a gesture lacking reserve or hypocrisy, so as to be able to smite today's friend, tomorrow's enemy, at the next political meeting. On the other hand, all were fascinated by the foreign woman, as though by a being from another planet (Venus) who had nothing in common with them. She was enthroned behind a great bowl of Moldavian grapes, between an important female dervish with short hair, without make-up, wearing a black suit, and an octogenarian People's Artist in a

lace jabot, dressed in a fashion which has never existed but which was invented particularly for People's Artists, to evoke the days when they were the friends of Chekhov or of Caragiale. The Frenchwoman had neither the decrepit age of this witness of the *ancien régime,* nor the pale austerity of the representative of the new. She had the age of perfect femininity and she was beautiful, with Celtic eyes of emerald green and a gown of lace and sea-green satin; she was blond, proud, and discreet; her smile was reserved, her voice low, her beauty neither focused on herself nor dazzling spectators ten feet away; like a phoenix in the middle of a flock of sparrows, she spread gentle emanations, alien but neither blinding nor mysterious (or rather, as if her mystery itself were discreet, almost imperceptible): an obvious miracle and like any miracle, absolutely invisible to anyone who refused to admit it. A woman beside me said in Russian:

"She's skinny as a pencil! And what a ridiculous style."

We turned around: it was a Soviet specialist invited to collaborate with the State Cinema. She had broad, fleshy shoulders, ash-blond hair in little braids around her head, and an opulent posterior; less squat, she would have made a rather pug-nosed Rubens. Her ice-blue dress, the lack of make-up, the little wristwatch on her big round arm proved that she had arrived recently, still unchanged by our equivocal soil. Her pale gaze was of an absolute frigidity. It expressed the sentiment of the Spanish priest before a Hindu temple: total otherness. Villehardouin speaks of Crusaders in Constantinople who saw displayed on the Spina of the Hippodrome a number of "automatons in human form, which on account of their great age no longer functioned": they were

bronze statues, gods and goddesses by Lysippus and Scopas.

Isolde exchanged a glance with me and then we turned toward the door, for Comrade Basil Morcovici was making his entrance with his *companion* (that was the official term). I tried to read the traces of passion on his face: nothing could be seen but a bristling, somber boar. His little pig eyes slipped across the faces around him and stopped when they reached us. I remembered that my chief task was not that of a memorialist of my time, but consisted for the moment in saving my archives. I therefore greeted him, making an effort to spread the muscles of my face in a kind of smile. Basil Morcovici gave me a brief and hostile nod, as though he would have preferred to see me elsewhere. His dark gaze stopped on Isolde for a second; she had followed my advice and was wearing a dress three years old; aside from that, her height, beauty, and smile were irreparable.

Beside Basil Morcovici, his companion, our friend Valentine, in heelless slippers (in order not to be taller than he), was wearing a black dress that clung to her superb figure. Finally! I thought to myself. She's arrived, the flower of our sweat-drenched earth, watered with blood and tears, the flower of this Rumanian soil that produces more luscious fruits than anywhere else in Europe, and lovelier women and lustier men, this tormented earth dripping with sap and genital liquors, and from which perhaps will rise a new face of God. . . . Let us look at her, this *victrix* of ours, look at her standing beside the gentle, subdued foreign woman like the

end of an August afternoon, perfect and imperceptibly, secretly exhausted. . . .

But Valentine was much heavier than the last time I had seen her. Her face was broader, fuller, her beautiful caressing eyes dim and hard. I bowed before the power and the disaster, and Isolde showed her her teeth in a purely anatomical smile. Valentine sent back her distant smile, with an omniscient faint sadness, like Eve after having eaten of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, to be as God, and having gained only lucidity.

IV

The Security Service seemed to have forgotten me. Other friends, at closer range, watched my sudden and swift reascension more attentively. I was still a creature of another species; they weren't forgetting it, and kept a close watch. It required more than I had done to reassure them, I learned from Erasmus. I met him at a work session; we left it together.

"You have changed a great deal. Your case is being discussed everywhere. People have been watching you; you're another man. You're more disciplined, you control yourself better: in a word, you've come into line."

"Then troubles serve a purpose after all," I replied in the style of my new character—and at the same time, with an ambiguous sincerity that now afforded me a grim joy. He took me to his office for a cup of coffee. He sat down behind his desk, and I took the chair in front.

"It's been over a year and a half since I've set foot in here," I said.

"It could have been much more," he said. He looked at me for a long time and went on:

"You're a new man. Everyone is pleased with you. I was invited to Herakles Nitzelus' the other day; your little friend Leopold was there too. We talked about you. Leopold congratulated Herakles on his success with you. Then he said—you know how he is, with that innocent expression and the tip of his nose wiggling: 'But do you really trust him?' It's a fine friend you have there in Leopold. Herakles wrinkled up his face and said in that Transylvanian accent of his, 'Only the devil knows!' Zita exclaimed, 'No, I don't trust him for a minute!' Leopold wanted to show how ingenious and useful he is: 'He takes the floor in meetings, he acts the man of principle, but we'll have to see if it's the same when it comes down to men he likes and admires.' He even gave an example: he knows you well, he knows what you think of Prospero Dobre. You know, the day after tomorrow, Prospero's case will be submitted to the discussion of a Party meeting, in my chief's office. Herakles suggested to old Malvolio to ask you to come too, even though you're in another department. The old devil remembered how they had offered you the floor last year and you wriggled out of it. 'Very *just*,' he said. 'We have to give this boy the opportunity to *develop himself politically*.' So he'll follow what you say closely; psychological problems always interest him. . . . Of course, *if* you take the floor. You don't have to, you know, don't you?" Erasmus concluded coldly, officially—he wasn't going to compromise himself by giving advice.

When I left him, I wondered what had driven him to do me this favor. Had he had a moment's sympathy for me? I didn't know he was going through an inner crisis combined with a serious illness. He had been to see the doctors, for he felt very sick. He had cancer, and suspected as much, though he was told nothing.

I described our conversation to Isolde, who said:

"Whether you take the floor or not makes no difference, Prospero's fate is settled in advance; but you have a unique opportunity to convince Malvolio that you are really what he wants you to be."

"I couldn't endure Prospero's contempt!" I exclaimed. "I'm the only friend he has, the last friend. He doesn't expect to see me come in and stab him. And he knows perfectly well I can sit there and not ask for the floor. If I don't keep still, it means that I want to get as dirty as the rest, that I insist on it, that I'm eager for it!"

Then, as Isolde said nothing, I said:

"Of course I'll have to talk."

And I talked, the day after the next, I was one of those who *stigmatized* him, who *branded him with a red-hot iron.* I won't describe the wretched ingenuity with which I went on. As I talked, I prayed to myself: "God forgive me! God deliver me! I can't endure this any longer, God, don't put me to the test, I can't take any more!" And out of the corner of my eye, in the second row, I saw my friend staring at me, yellow, fixed, fascinated as the victim is always fascinated by his murderer.

After the meeting, Erasmus took my arm and told me:

"You did very well. Nothing, no one could save him

anyway. But you were observed. I didn't tell you, I couldn't, but you have been proposed twice to go on a delegation, first to Vienna, then to Moscow, and Malvolio has crossed out your name with his own hand."

"What, even for Moscow? And with my wife and daughter at home?"

"Yes, it's not a question of your wife and child, it's a question of you. We've already had cases where men have fled leaving wives and children, and we've had to send them on afterward to avoid an international scandal. No, it's you who were in question, and the way you've just spoken has done you a great service."

I escaped as soon as I could and went home. Isolde was holding the child in her lap, about to nurse her. She was sitting in a chair and had opened her housecoat, revealing her beautiful pink-and-white breasts. She was bursting with health, smiling, happy. I left her in peace and went to take off my clothes. I was in my pajamas when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

It was the man from whom I expected a phone call less than from anyone else in the world: Prospero. His voice sounded strange. I wanted to run away, to hide; I was ashamed. He couldn't know why I had done what I had done; so he couldn't forgive me.

"Come down," he said. "I have something to tell you."

I hesitated: what could he want of me?

"But I'm in my pajamas. It's late now. Couldn't we talk some other time?"

"At least out of shame you should come down when I call you. Get dressed. I'll wait for you out in the street."

"But . . . why not come up?"

"I don't want to," Prospero said. "I don't want to disturb Isolde or the baby. Come down. I'll be there in five minutes."

"All right."

I found him on the sidewalk, in the little street that ends at the Cismigi. It was a dark and rainy night. The park's enormous trees were black and shiny. The ground was muddy. Despite the asphalt and the cobbles, the dust and mud of the Baragan invade Bucharest, a false city like all the false cities of Eurasia. Prospero didn't take his hands out of his pockets. I dared not hold out my own. We set off side by side through the park.

"I'm sorry for what I did," I said. "But I had to do it."

"I know," he said. "You have a wife and a child, you had to think of the future."

"You despise me," I said, with a bitter smile. It was hard. The last person whose respect I valued. And I couldn't explain to him.

"You'd like to be admired?" he answered sarcastically. "You've turned rotten too! They've broken your neck too!"

"Wait," I said. "Don't judge me. Maybe later on you'll understand and say I was right."

"Pouah! You all tell me that! If you had at least found something new to say! All of you—Leopold, Ciorap, all the ones who aren't professional Stalinists, excuse themselves for tactical reasons. For two years they've justified every stage of their collapse that way. I didn't expect it from you."

"Wait. Wait. In me . . ."

" 'In you' what? I suppose it's different in you, is that it?"

It *was* different, but I couldn't tell him. There are things you tell no one.

"I'm almost over wanting to talk to you," he continued. "You're the one I regret most. I remember what you were like in 1945, how eager you were, what plans you had! Pouah! The Memoirs of our Time! Pepys and Guy Patin, Ssŭ-ma Ch'ien and Plutarch, Saint-Simon and Froissart, Villehardouin and Boswell, Xenophon and Sallust—remember? *Herodotus of Halicarnassus has written the greatest deeds of the Hellenes and the Barbarians so that their memory may not be lost,* remember? And now what are you? A terrorized functionary, pale, puffy, your eyes popping out of your head, a man drained, dishonored, done for! Too bad. I pity you, and I'd like to strangle you. Why did you let yourself fall apart like this? You think you can survive? Wrong. You've chosen the worst way to survive; they won't let you. You're 'tainted' by the West. You'll never be able to hide that leprosy completely. You're clear-headed, you're enlightened, and you won't be able to deceive them there! They'll throw you on the dungheap! They don't want lucidity. They want to sleep. A billion human beings want to sleep and dream great dreams. And act with the efficiency of a somnambulist. The Steppe begins here and continues to Vladivostok, and gives birth to its own civilization. Lucidity will come to them in five hundred years, as it came to the Europeans five hundred years after their own Crusades. 'God wills it!' 'History is with us!' 'For the Virgin!' 'Everything's in Aristotle, everything's in Marx!' 'For the World Commune!' Don't you see with what holy horror they reject the West? We're all miscreants, *giaours,* and they're the new Islam. And

Western culture is bourgeois and rotten, as the library at Alexandria was either alien to the Koran or subsumed by the Koran, and in both cases of no use, good for burning. And we—you and I—we're seeds of the West that have taken root here, trees twisted by prevailing winds. We don't belong to the Steppe. We're both heretics, like the Persians in Islam. You can submit all you want, they'll never believe you. At the next thaw, you'll betray yourself. You won't survive. There's only one solution. But . . . Well, it's your business."

He broke off and looked me in the eyes. His own were yellow and shiny. He made a grimacing smile.

"And now what are you going to do? Go to the Party and denounce me?"

I shook my head. He looked at me hard for a second longer, and said with pity in his voice:

"Poor devil. Poor bastard!"

He turned his back and strode away into the darkness.

That was my last meeting with my friend Prospero. Afterward, he behaved unexpectedly. As if, suddenly, he had changed his mind, convinced this time that he could disguise himself and achieve a perfect mimesis, a perfect integration. He seemed to be possessed by a frenzy of submission, an ecstasy of abjection. A few weeks later, I read in the journal of the Central Committee a letter he had sent to the editors. He thanked the Party for having helped him by its severe criticism and accused himself of bourgeois ideology, of counterrevolutionary and antipatriotic views. He warned others not to follow this path, which led to cosmopolitanism and to positions *objectively* hostile to the working class. The fact that this letter had been published was a good sign for him: they had

spared him a total and definitive silence, they would let him go on working. As a matter of fact, a few months later, I saw him at a great meeting in the Floreasca arena, where he took the floor. He looked so tiny, in the distance, under the great glass roof. Above him, at a long table draped in red, against a mass of red and Rumanian flags, under their own portraits in superhuman dimensions and (if I may be permitted the expression) superhumanly ugly, sat the members of the Politburo. Prospero was the most impassioned, the most emotional of the speakers. He screamed frantically:

"The Party! Our beloved Party!"

The hall, electrified by the accents of delirium, burst into applause. He continued in the same energumen's tone:

". . . The imperialist vermin! . . . The nauseating international monopolies!"

The physical nausea apparent in Prospero's tone made the hall go tense. Two members of the Politburo put their heads together and exchanged a few words. They too had sensed that *intoxication of slavery* which the Marquis de Custine remarked during his travels in Russia. Perhaps they were saying, "He speaks well. There's one intellectual *devoted to the people.*" They didn't know that the freeze was to produce great actors, though not on the stage. When you terrify people, you must give up knowing them. After a year of superhuman servility and abjection, Prospero Dobre, at last about to be named (as Diocletian Sava had intended before the freeze) member of the Academy and recently decorated, was sent to an International Congress of Historians in the

West and never returned. He had taken with him the manuscript of *The Mechanics of Revolution.*

V

Everything was going well. Once more I enjoyed the best relations—those splendid relations of the kind we have, roughly cordial, with an undertone of Byzantino-Tartar diplomatic refinement—with Alfred Anania, with Nitzelus and Zita, with Morcovici himself, who had grown gentler (I learned later that it was Valentine who had influenced him, out of sympathy for us); Isaias Proorocesco himself smiled at me, Felix and Anita Fortunesco invited us to dinner, Leopold and Ciorap came to see my daughter. (Leonas and Theresa Tanase were on a mission to China.) Tinel Zambilovici was expelled from the Party at the same time, and Arthur Zodie was making himself a reputation as a hardened Stalinist: he was publishing studies on Lenin's notebooks. Erasmus was very sick. Diocletian Sava had an obscure job, and no one ever saw his Shulamite. And Malvolio ruled, with satisfaction, over the ice and the devastation. Bucharest was filling up with new and monumental buildings; it was becoming a beautiful modern city inhabited by poor people, furious and sullen, whom no one could reach any more, for they had learned to hide themselves. But at least they had a roof over their heads. The old Bucharest—complex, voluptuous, mysterious, extreme, fabulous, shabby —no longer existed.

And Isolde was no longer beautiful. After the first in-

toxication of maternity, she had remembered our decision. One knows such things with the body, some secret link between awareness and the neuro-vegetative system affects the body. Isolde aged ten years that year; she lost calcium, and her teeth. I still wasn't sleeping. Mornings, after sleepless nights, I heard our daughter crowing in the next room; her tiny shrill voice pierced my heart and I hear it still. I have only to close my eyes and I hear it: she is near me, to my left, behind the door. I open my eyes again: she is no longer here, she is far away.

It was during those nights that I had the feeling of madness for the first time. One usually has an awareness of the outside world. And suddenly you feel this image of the world detaching itself, losing its contact with reality; you were looking at a tree: suddenly that tree firmly rooted in the ground becomes an unstable medusa whose tentacles are floating in something fluid. Wasn't I crazy? I wanted to get away from my brothers, Malvolio, Leopold, and the others, only to come closer to them by the exercise of memory and lucidity, I mean by the biographical act. But this act itself—was it anything more than a shadow, a reflection deprived of being? And what was I daring to do? Torment Isolde, whose body and hidden soul were suffering animally, unknown to herself—and then abandon the child, that delicious creator of inarticulate and acid vowels when she woke up in the morning? Abandon her to what? To the pity of men without pity, my brothers, still more cruel than I, crazed by their chimera? Wouldn't I be better off humiliating myself, renouncing my pride and my stubbornness and sending the consciousness of hu-

manity to the Devil, sleeping along with my hibernating brothers, and at least keeping warm my own child pressed against my body? If I accomplished my great project, who would thank me for it? Who had asked me to pursue it? They need bread and intoxication, my brothers, they don't need lucidity! And I myself? We are told of the terror of a great thinker who saw an open abyss beside his chair. I think I experienced it, in my way; but by wondering if I wasn't projecting myself falsely into the world. I spent my night praying, "God, forgive me. Enlighten me. Give me the strength to find the right way." The right way. It seems there were no others I could take.

Isolde often went out to walk the baby in the mornings. Sometimes I left my work and accompanied her. Once we drove to Stalin Square, taking the little baby carriage in the car; we unloaded it at the foot of the enormous bronze statue on its porphyry pedestal. At the end of the path to the lake, a few long black Zims were parked. The sky was blue, the trees black: a dry, brisk winter morning. The chauffeurs were listening to their radios and chatting with the police always stationed there. In the distance, the elegant villas of the country's masters seemed uninhabited. But at the foot of the statue a few women in furs, some nurses, children, and carriages were standing in the sun. We walked into the Park. In the distance, the tower of the Polygraphic Combinat loomed pink above a faint lilac fog that floated over the frozen lake. We greeted the women, who were the *companions* of high officials. Among them was Valentine, who spoke to us very kindly and looked at our child.

"How fat and pink, and what big eyes! Is it a girl?"

"Yes, a girl."

"Poor thing!" Valentine said, in a voice so tragic that it gave me a little shock.

"Why did you say that?" I asked.

"But . . . what can she do in life?" Valentine answered, and as we talked we walked on a few steps.

"She'll be beautiful if she looks like her mother," Valentine said. "And what will become of her? At the very most, a minister's wife, like me."

And she burst out laughing.

"That's not so bad," I said politely.

"Oh, you know, even these victories aren't worth anything! A villa, a country house that doesn't belong to you, a car, that's all. But that poor little thing won't know anything else. For her, it will be paradise. It's different for me. You remember, in 1945, when you were courting me? I was in love with a famous man, so distinguished, so attractive—he was forty-eight at the time. He died in prison at Aiud, like everyone else. He's the one who took me out on the lake at Snagov in his sailboat, and I lived with him in his friends' bungalow —they were industrialists who fled to Argentina. That's where I stopped being a girl. And you know, that's where I first slept with Basil Morcovici. It's funny, coincidences like that! The same rugs, the same paintings, the same furniture, the same house, the season, the time of day—everything was the same, and everything was different. We're different ourselves; the poor man who's crazy about you is another man, nothing's the same any more, really, it's all gone, and what's left? Nothing, a little

comfort, the fear of the future, nothing, nothing at all . . ."

Behind us, the women, the nurses, and the children were making a great hubbub of conversation and cries.

"You *were* in love with me in 1945, weren't you?" Valentine said, laughing. "And you were so handsome, tall and thin, blond as an archangel. Of course you were a little snot, too, a woman couldn't take you seriously. You've changed. It's frightening—you've grown heavier, bigger—you look like a Roman emperor of the decadence. And then that lusterless hair that's beginning to turn gray . . ."

"Don't worry, you're as beautiful as ever," I said.

"Oh, me!" she said indifferently. Then: "Listen, what does your wife have against me? How resentful she looks!"

"She envies you, you're too beautiful," I said gallantly. "But now that you're the companion of Comrade Morcovici, she's careful not to say anything about it! Ha ha ha!"

Valentine didn't laugh. She was pensive.

"You're still a handsome couple, the two of you. I'm glad you've reformed. My husband respects you, you know."

"I know whom I have to thank."

"Oh, that, you know . . . but I'm really pleased. You have a good position. Now they're going to let you make an automobile trip into Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Berlin. You're in favor now, no question about it."

"Yes, I've asked permission of Comrade Malvolio Leonte. A little sightseeing doesn't do anyone any harm."

"Of course, but it's so rarely that they permit it. . . .

It'll do you good, and your wife too. She has such a strange expression now, so drawn-looking, what's the matter? I think she looks a little haggard these days, her skin seems dry. You too, only you're heavier. You look sick. Yes, you should travel, it will raise your spirits, both of you. What will you do with the child while you're gone?"

"My wife's sister will take care of her; she loves the child as if it were her own."

"Oh good! Well, have a good time in Budapest and Prague. And you're going to Berlin as well?"

"I don't know. Maybe we'll be content with Leipzig and Weimar."

"How big she is! What a beautiful child!" Valentine exclaimed. We had returned to the group of mothers and nurses.

"What a pretty little woman she'll make!" Valentine said, still in her strange wistful tone, as if she had said, "What a shame!"

✳✳✳✳

CHAPTER

14

I

Somewhere there were men in boots and uniforms with wide epaulets, reading dossiers where my life and my wife's were described, dossiers which contained the denunciations, the reports, the photographs that concerned us. I walked up and down the hall at night, between the bathroom and the kitchen, three feet by nine, so as not to disturb the child, and I thought of those men whom I didn't know and who had probably never seen me. They would decide my fate. They finally rejected my request for a visa to leave the country—that is, I received no answer. Then I went quite humbly, smiling, to see Herakles Nitzelus and asked him for his

help. My abjection still flattered him; he wasn't blasé yet. He went to Malvolio and intervened for me. Malvolio felt that I should be encouraged, rewarded. He called the colonel of the Security Service who had stopped my papers. The passport commission approved our leaving the country for a trip of pleasure and study. We went with these papers to make a new request, for the car this time—for my archives, rolled inside an iron tube, were inserted in the air pipes around the motor. I wouldn't have had room for all these manuscripts on my person, in my clothes, or in the lining of the suitcases, dangerous as they were and so easy to discover; the car was of vital importance. A second commission examined my request and rejected it. The whole case, visas and papers in triplicate, came before a third commission superior to the other two. No answer. I went to the office, I participated in the usual sessions and meetings, and I took the floor with firmness and moderation, and rather harshly. At night I walked up and down the kitchen corridor without feeling any fatigue. By day I looked sick, but I kept smiling with the official joviality that had become second nature. Isolde grew thinner and thinner; you could see the bones of her skull through the skin of her shrunken face, as in a dying person. The child had always smiled at me, ever since she had learned to focus her eyes on any external object. Now, though (she was eight months old), she no longer looked at me. When I tried to attract her attention she turned her head away. Of course she could neither guess nor feel that I was going to abandon her. But those eyes that ignored me made me sweat with anguish at night, during my con-

demned-man's walks, when I saw the night sky turn pale over the Boulevard Elizabeth.

Malvolio Leonte vouched for me. So that the Security Service, which on principle refuses all exit visas until one of the chiefs takes the responsibility, thus excusing them from it, finally delivered our papers. Isolde said:

"Shouldn't we wait a little?"

"How long?"

"I don't know. A few days."

She struggled feebly against my resolution and her own. She was ill and the doctors could find nothing wrong. She kept losing calcium, her teeth were breaking in her mouth. She knew there was no reason to wait: visas had been canceled on the station steps; people in the airports of neighboring capitals had been called back by telephone. As soon as one had an exit visa, one had to leave at once.

So we left, one morning. Isolde gave the last instructions to her sister, who expected us to return in a month or so. I went to say good-by to my daughter. She was beginning to stand now, supporting herself on something —that day, it was the mirrored wardrobe. She was fascinated by her own image, pressing her tiny nose against it until her breath clouded it over. I knelt beside her. Would she look at me? She looked me straight in the eyes and smiled at me with a pleased expression. I lifted her up and she put her arms around my neck; I felt the contact of her little hands, cold from pressing against the glass.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you, thank you. And forgive me, please forgive me. Good-by." Then, terrified

by what I had said, I corrected myself and said, "Until I see you again."

I handed her to Isolde, who played with her and then left her abruptly and went to say good-by to her sister. Isolde didn't look at me, but I could sense her hatred.

Then we left. At each frontier, a phone call from Bucharest could stop us. But nothing happened. We passed through the capitals of rebellions drowned in blood by the soldiers of different and successive foreign masters. Budapest, Bratislava, Prague, Berlin. Fields of ruins, cold new buildings, earth blackened by the ash of conflagrations: Berlin was dead. At the end of certain streets, you saw by night the many-colored blinking of illuminated signs: over there was something extraordinary, the other world, or the other half of the world. A man who had not stopped when challenged by the police and had tried to run toward the bright lights had been killed the other day, shot in the back. Another had managed to get through, but suddenly realizing that he would never see his family again, had committed suicide in a vacant lot. Isolde and I crossed the line (I had slipped between the back of the seat and Isolde's back, to receive the bullets before her, at least) but they didn't fire; *they* were two pink and stupid boys who began running after us, gesticulating when they saw the car turn between two ruins and drive off at top speed in the forbidden direction.

II

Now we live outside a city in this other world. There are many new houses in the area, and a tall concrete tower lit up at night, and truck gardens, and then the woods. People are calm and contented. Perhaps they're bored? Their writers and their film makers attribute a sense of emptiness and a great vague fear to them. The shopgirls do what the wives of the omnipotent in Rumania would never dare: they wear thin high heels, short skirts, strange hairstyles, and they paint their eyelids green, their lips silver. In the best café of the city, one afternoon a week, models show dresses: they are tall, skinny girls who make their ritual gestures as they take their inhuman steps, glancing with depraved and hieratic eyes at no one in particular, like priestesses of Ishtar. Others strip themselves naked at night in cabarets, making spasmodic movements with their hips, as if slightly disconnected robots had been installed in their lovely flesh. It is a calm, voluptuous, and exhausted world. At night, the woods smell like woods; by day, like burnt gasoline. Every minute, a great airplane lands or takes off from the airfield just outside my window. Swallows whistle around us; but in the distance the jets scream across the torn sky, and our windows tremble. An incredible number of cars pass under our windows; they are more numerous than informers back home.

Isolde is resting. She is exhausted by the permanent frustration of her maternity. She is growing old before her time. But she pleases me as much as in the old days, when we were sitting on a wobbly block of concrete among the fishermen. And we love each other for

the same unknown reason that has nothing to do with youth or old age, beauty or ugliness. I talk to her. We talk about anything that comes into our heads. We never get bored. When there is a silence I immediately find a subject: I don't want to leave her alone. Sometimes, though, she escapes me. When I leave the house, or even the room where she is, I come back and find her with her eyes fixed in space, her face ashen. Then I take her to the movies and we see three films in a row; or else I talk to her endlessly, about anything.

For I have written the masters of our country to ask that our child be restored to us. First answer: Come back. I wrote again. No answer. And since then, whatever I do, nothing. They do not want to create precedents. Isolde cannot pass a children's clothing store without stopping and staring at each object for a long time.

I can sleep now, but I have a recurrent nightmare: I'm back in my country, they haven't done anything to me, but I can never leave again. How could I be so crazy as to go back? And I wake up, suffocated by my pounding heart. Or else Isolde wakens me, shaking me, alarmed:

"What's the matter? Why were you groaning? What were you dreaming about?"

But that will pass. What won't pass is the question I ask myself all day and especially at night, and to which I find no answer. I don't believe in a Judgment Day when we shall rise from among the dead and find ourselves face to face, Isolde and I, both of us with our child. There is only this life. Will we see our child again? The Day of Judgment is at every moment, in our hearts. God in our hearts asks us each one question. I don't know how to answer the question He asks me. I dare not find

the answer. For the answer may be a condemnation. And the suffering of anguish is less than the suffering of despair over having committed an irreparable mistake. Our child asks us, in our hearts, "Why have you abandoned me? Why did you lie to yourselves when you pretended that these men would give me back to you? Why have you abandoned me to follow your lover in his madness? And you, why have you abandoned me, and why have you broken the heart of this woman who loves you, to run after your chimera?" And as a matter of fact, the reflection and the echo of life may not be worth making the living suffer for them. My brothers, who ask nothing of me, are either unaware of me or condemn me, and may not be worth the trouble of being protected from the nothingness that will devour us all anyway, even if it is postponed a little by my biographical act. Maybe I'm cruelly guilty of having loved them, them and their lives, our life, more than that of my child. Perhaps the just man humbly remains and accepts and prays, and perhaps my effort is insane, criminal. My lucidity, my contribution to humanity's awareness, the inestimable act of consciousness may not be worth being paid for at this price. Perhaps it was better to accept the frenzy, the unconsciousness, and the delirium imposed upon me and to pray and love men in secret, to remain beside the creature we brought into the world and let ourselves be swept away and disappear, and with us the written reflection of our time, in the Ice Age from which is emerging—terrible, unaware, bloody, boring, greedy, proud, savage, and sad—the new world that still refuses to see its own image.

That is the question I ask myself and which I dare not

answer, for fear of finding myself guilty and judged For I have chosen. Isolde has chosen. We are together and we wait to recover our child, or the certitude of being separated from her forever. For the two of us, today and tomorrow and every day of our lives is Judgment Day.

Petru Dumitriu

was born in Bazias, Rumania, in 1924. successful literary career included writ for magazines in Bucharest, winning Rumanian State Prize for Literature th times, and serving as Director of the St Publishing House. In February, 1960, longer able to reconcile his conscience a writer with the dictates of the state, he caped with his wife through East Berlin the West at the end of a carefully arran cultural mission to various satellite co tries. Circumstances required that the cou leave their infant daughter behind w relatives in Rumania, for any attempt openly depart from the country as a fan would have failed. The Dumitrius belie that their daughter would be allowed to j them later. This was a sad misjudgmen the situation, however, for the whereab of the child has since been kept hidden fi them.

Thus *Meeting at the Last Judgment* h the sorrowful note of a personal confes of guilt. Petru Dumitriu's choice of freed as an individual and a writer, deman a monstrous sacrifice which, as long a lives, will never cease to haunt him.

The Dumitrius now reside in Frankf Germany, and have recently become parents of a second daughter.

Family Jewels, a previous novel by P Dumitriu, appeared in the United State 1961. It is the first part of a trilogy descri the fate of an aristocratic and decadent manian family. The remaining two volu are now in preparation for publicatio English.

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